**Evaluation of the League for Learning
Self-Regulation Pilot Project**

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CONTENTS

LIST OF APPENDICES
APPENDIX 1: PROJECT DIARY
APPENDIX 2: RECORDING PEER REVIEW ACTIVITIES
APPENDIX 3: HOST COLLEGES' FEEDBACK
APPENDIX 4: PERSONAL STATEMENT BY RESEARCHER

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION
This project was funded by City College Norwich, Lewisham College and West Nottinghamshire College and was commissioned to evaluate the effectiveness of a project which piloted a model of peer review in Further Education (FE) as a means of facilitating the process of self-regulation.

The concept of 'self-regulation' is currently one of the key messages in FE (*e.g.* see Foster 2005, p.24). With support from the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA), Association of Colleges (AoC), and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), self-regulation is seen to be a powerful tool for colleges to take greater responsibility for their own quality improvement through rigorous self assessment, peer referencing and effective sharing of good practice. Foster (2005, p.72) recommends that the QIA and LSC work with colleges to develop a methodology of self assessment ('underpinned by broader measures of impact and value for money') which, if successful, would lead to greater self-government in the sector. It is within this context that the League for Learning Peer Referencing Pilot Project was envisaged, as a proactive mechanism for driving forward change and quality improvement in FE from the ground level upwards.

PROJECT AND EVALUATION AIMS
The specific aims and objectives of the project were:

- To use the Common Inspection Framework and to consider the use of the Business Excellence Model framework to review and conduct peer verification of the college's self-assessment grades
- To test the host college's judgement through a mature, professional dialogue for development and quality improvement
- To host a two day peer review at each college of the host's college's Self-Assessment Report (SAR)
- To follow-up each peer review with support from the partners for two to three days of development activities in areas for improvement
- To share good practice.

The aim of the evaluation was to consider whether the project aims and objectives had been met and to document and provide a narrative of the learning processes taking place for the colleges and individual participants throughout the project.

METHODOLOGY
An adaptive research methodology was employed to meet effectively the needs of evaluating such a developmental project as this. It involved:

- A review and analysis of project documentation and related literature
- Field observation and qualitative data collection (*i.e.* attendance at key events and meetings)
- Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with key stakeholders
- Disseminating research observations to participants at key stages to feed into the effective development of the project.

CONCLUSIONS
1. A successful outcome to the project was achieved.
- All project aims and objectives were met.
- The process observed by the researcher was rigorous and robust; peer review feedback has been critical and fair.

- It has allowed for a mature and professional dialogue for development and has already fed into processes of quality improvement.
- Most importantly, the project developed within the sprit in which it was envisaged (*i.e.* it involved the 'verification' of college's judgements through their Self-Assessment Report) and this must be attributed to the professionalism of those who have managed its development so far and those who have participated in the pilot. Credit is due to these individuals and it should be recognised that they present a convincing case as to how greater self-regulation in the sector can be realised in practice. They should be trusted to continue to develop the project in the near future as they have already demonstrated that they are well qualified to articulate and achieve effectively the best outcome to the process for their colleges.
- Within the effective management of the project, there are a number of themes which fed into its success:
    - Choice of partnership allows for a sense of ownership and commitment to the project
    - Presenting peer review as a positive opportunity for professional development and quality improvement ensures it is a process that is welcomed by individuals in host colleges
    - Effective communication of the expectations (*i.e.* briefing) of the host college
    - The experience of the peer review team (*e.g.* not only in asking the most effective questions but doing so in the right manner) and the willingness to rise to the challenge or demands of the process in each different situation
    - The effective management and leadership of nominees in particular (*e.g.* in identifying and bringing the necessary skills base to the peer review teams)
    - The openness and honesty of all in the host college and peer review team
    - The dedication and commitment of all involved
    - The ability to adapt the process to meet the needs of the host college and peer review team and to learn from good practice throughout the course of the project to enable its development in a way that would be beneficial to the participant organisations.

2. The project has had a significant impact already on the colleges involved. It is deemed to be 'the way forward' for the sector. Strong evidence to support this claim is provided by a number of outcomes and examples of good practice that were recorded by the research. For example, peer review has the potential to be experienced across all levels of an organisation, from senior management to teaching staff through development activities that have been an outcome of the peer review events. Indeed, the project has promoted a wealth of professional discourse between participant colleges providing the opportunity to share good practice and devise solutions to common issues in the sector. This professional dialogue has continued beyond the peer review events. At the heart of this dialogue has been a shared drive for continuous quality improvement.

3. Additionally, lessons learnt from the aspect of delivering the project have been considerable.
- Allowing two days for a peer review was sufficient, improved by bringing together the team the day, or evening, before the review.
- Colleges may wish to consider whether future peer reviews take the opportunity to revisit issues raised in previous reviews.

- Working through peer review in practice allowed early uncertainty over how to overcome the issue of using inspectorial language to be resolved. Presenting feedback as 'strengths' and 'areas for improvement' for example was less successful a format than presenting it in no order of priority, as observations or 'issues to consider further'.
- The dual approach of presenting feedback (*i.e.* verbal and written) was successful; verbal feedback immediately following a review had a currency of freshness whilst written feedback allowed time for insightful reflection.
- Greater recognition of the learner voice, through the introduction of student representation in the final peer review was deemed to be a success by all concerned.
- Project diaries were not completed by participants. These were seen to be burdensome and participants instead relied on the research to capture lessons learnt and the development of the project.
- 'Record of Activity' forms and 'Evidence Example' forms were abandoned. They were deemed to be too proscriptive, too inspectorial in approach and unable to capture effectively the observational style of reporting required by peer review here.

RECOMMENDATIONS
Recommendations are grouped according to issues for further consideration in relation to project sustainability, capacity building and examples of good practice to be included or developed in the future.

SUSTAINABILITY
- In terms of sustainability, it is clear that peer review has some part to play in realising or moving towards increased self-regulation. Peer review certainly is sustainable in the short-term and possibly long-term as well.
- All participants have expressed a keen interest to continue with peer review with further interest from others in the host colleges and beyond.
- Principals are committed to the process.
- The opportunity to develop on the initial collaborative relationships set up in this project is considerable.
- Utilising one approach to peer review is unlikely to be of benefit across the sector. As a process of value to all it needs to be adaptable but this presents the need for careful consideration in how to maintain the integrity of the process.
- Strong, effective management is needed to ensure that peer review develops in the spirit in which it was envisaged.
- Discussion is needed to clarify the future plans of the QIA and LSC with regard to peer review, although it is likely that this will be forthcoming on the completion of all self-regulation projects they are supporting.
- Careful consideration may also need to be given to how the process of peer review will best fit in with other regulatory practices.
- Colleges will need to consider how they fund the resources needed for capacity building the project in the future.

GOOD PRACTICE
The following points of good practice are based on the set of circumstances specific to this project and may not suit every situation in which peer review is eventually used. It is recommended that:
- All individuals being newly introduced to peer review should be made aware of the project protocols. Ownership of the process is particularly important for peer reviewers, who additionally should attend an 'awareness preparation event'. Alternatively or additionally, protocols could be included as a point of reference

amongst the peer review documentation presented by host colleges for the benefit of peer reviewers new to the process

- Where possible, every effort should be made to provide written feedback within four weeks of the review
- A minimum of two reviewers per review area is ideal and a learner representative is highly advisable
- The opportunity for dialogue with the host college should be presented to all of the reviewers prior to a peer review event. It should not be restricted to the nominees alone. This was a desired outcome made by several participants
- A League for Learning website should be set up with easy access to information about the different experiences of peer review/other self-regulation initiatives, which disseminates the outcomes of projects and provides a forum in which other colleges may learn from this good practice
- The learning that takes place within the next phase of the project needs to be recorded
- Some consideration of providing impact analysis in the future life of the project is advisable
- Where possible, greater sharing of experiences between the two frameworks being piloted within the overarching project would be beneficial.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE NATIONAL CONTEXT FOR SELF-REGULATION AND PEER REVIEW

This project was funded by City College Norwich, Lewisham College and West Nottinghamshire College and was commissioned to evaluate the effectiveness of a project which piloted a model of peer review in Further Education (FE) as a means of facilitating the process of self-regulation.

Within FE in recent years, self-regulation has been seen to have a potentially major role in realising and maintaining continuous quality improvement across the sector:

> *"Across the school and further education and training sectors there is an increasing emphasis on quality assurance as an institutional / organisational responsibility and a consequent lessening of the weight of external 'audits' – the phrase for today is 'intelligent accountability'. This shift in the relative weighting of external and internal accountability arises partly from a sense that, following a period of intense and rigorous inspection by external 'auditors' of various kinds, institutions and organisations are now better equipped to apply the same criteria themselves. There is also a growing recognition that improvement is more likely where there is self-regulation and continuous and sustained self-evaluation, than where external inspection alone is relied on."*
>
> (LSC, 2004, p. 10)

The strength of this message has continued to grow. Indeed, the LSC 'Agenda for Change' (LSC, 2005) recently stated that it would work with agencies such as the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA), Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) and Association of Colleges (AoC) to achieve self-regulation in the sector and suggested that this could be achieved through a culture of 'self-improvement' facilitated by rigorous self-assessment and peer referencing ('peer review'). This would enable greater autonomy of quality improvement through the sharing of good practice and the creation of professional networks between colleges and agencies concerned.

This support was also voiced in the white paper 'Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances' (TSO, 2006) and by the findings of the Foster Review (Foster, 2005), presented at the Association of Colleges annual conference in November 2005, and lending strong backing to the need for Further Education colleges to take responsibility for their own quality improvement. It suggests that self-regulation should be a medium term goal for the FE sector and states:

> *"It is important to make a distinction between the need to prove quality and the need to improve it. Currently, the rigours of proving the quality of provision to the plethora of interested bodies, including qualification bodies, are in danger of detracting from the need for continuous improvement and the ownership of that by FE colleges… key responsibility for quality improvement rests with colleges themselves. Self assessment, based on quantitative and qualitative measures… through rigorous benchmarking and peer review, is the way forward for colleges."*
> (Foster, 2005, p.31).

The report also highlights good practice in Denmark for the inclusion of the learner voice in self-assessment practices (Foster, 2005, p. 33), suggesting that this is an element for consideration in the development of any peer review or peer referencing methodology in this country. Foster (2005, p.72) clearly recommends that the QIA and Learning and Skills Council (LSC) work with colleges to develop a methodology of self

assessment, 'underpinned by broader measures of impact and value for money', which, if successful, would enable the greater self-government in the sector that it proposes.

This recommendation has come at a time when there are plans to restructure quality assurance and improvement agencies and policies in the sector, some changes already having been made. For example, a recent consultation suggested the creation of a single inspectorate for children and learners, amalgamating the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) with Ofsted (BRE, 2005). In April 2006, the QIA, with responsibility for facilitating quality improvement in the sector, was formed following the re-organisation of the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA). Additionally, from September 2005, a new inspection regime for colleges was introduced, the Common Inspection Framework (CIF), against which colleges are graded according to five key questions (Ofsted, 2006a):

1) How well do learners achieve?
2) How effective are teaching, training and learning?
3) How well do programmes and activities meet the needs and interests of learners?
4) How well are learners guided and supported?
5) How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?

Within these new inspection arrangements, colleges are given shorter notice of inspection periods (a minimum of three weeks), greater emphasis is placed on the observation of teaching and learning and the college's annual Self-Assessment Report (SAR), with inspectors assessing the college's capacity to realise quality improvement. Colleges with a record of good performance will only be subject to a 'lighter touch' inspection, involving less direct inspection of teaching.

It is within this context of the strategic reform of the Further Education and training sector that the League for Learning Peer Referencing Pilot Project was envisaged, as a proactive mechanism for driving forward change and quality improvement in FE from the ground level upwards. It is one of eight peer referencing pilots currently being trialled in England with the support of the LSC, AoC and QIA who form a steering group with additional college representatives. The other pilots/participants in this group are:

- East Midlands Colleges Self-Regulation Pilot
- South East College Peer Review and Collective Self-Assessment
- London South Vocational Further Education Best Practice Forum
- South West Regional Improvement Partnership
- NAPAEO Self-Regulation Pathfinder
- North West Independent Specialist Colleges
- North West Colleges

Notably, the League for Learning Peer Referencing pilot project is the only national pilot, encompassing colleges of a wide geographic spread (Section 2). It therefore offers a valuable insight into how recent strategic reforms in the sector, relating to self-regulation, could be tested out in practicable terms in a national dimension. The steering group, to which these pilots must report, sees the outcomes of these projects feeding into the 'possible roll-out of a national peer referencing scheme, using good practice models developed through the pilot projects' (Cox, 2006) with the eventual potential to inform a self-assessment model that leads towards greater self-regulation in the sector.

This briefing document (Cox, 2006) also provides a useful definition of peer referencing and peer review:

> *"For the purpose of this project, peer referencing may be defined as 'groups of colleges working together in using the views of fellow professionals and comparative performance indicators as reference points in assessing and improving the quality of provision within their organisations'. Peer referencing builds on the principles of 'peer review' - a process whereby professionals of similar status or standing seek to arrive at collective judgements about the quality of provision, as well as decisions on improvement priorities and actions. Peer referencing may be distinguished from peer review in terms of the greater weight attached to performance measurement and the benchmarking of performance."*

Cox (2006) states furthermore that peers are 'people of equal status, who work in a similar environment and have shared knowledge, expertise or skills' both within and between different organisations.

The QIA is yet to evaluate these pilots when their final reports are completed in February 2007 and they are therefore not discussed further here, apart from to comment that each one has taken a very different approach to testing out mechanisms of peer referencing or peer review leading to self-regulation. It is probably fair to say at this stage, that the League for Learning Peer Referencing pilot project seems to have taken the most organic, developmental approach out of all the pilots. This presented an interesting challenge for the researcher whose task it was to evaluate one of the models within this pilot. This report is the realisation of that evaluation and has been structured to discuss the following themes:

- The relationship of the participating colleges to one another, through the 'League for Learning'
- The project aims and objectives
- The evaluation aims and objectives and the research methodology employed
- Planning the project and preparing participants
- How 'peer review' worked in practice and how the lessons learnt impacted on the development of the project
- The conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation.

2.   PROJECT BACKGROUND

2.1   THE LEAGUE FOR LEARNING
The League for Learning ('LfL' or 'L4L') was established by West Nottinghamshire College in 2004 'bringing together seven Colleges passionate about learning' (WNC, 2006). These seven colleges were City College Norwich, Doncaster College, Guildford College, Lewisham College, Knowsley Community College, North Hertfordshire College and West Nottinghamshire College. In 2006, Hull College was also invited to join the League for Learning. The L4L was created with the aim of 'sharing and cascading excellence to improve the life of the learner' (WNC, 2006). To this end, an 'L4L Festival' is held annually to provide the opportunity for colleagues to meet, to discuss current trends and issues in Further Education and to disseminate good practice amongst these colleges. A lead college for the League is appointed each year; in the academic year 2005/06 this was North Hertfordshire College, passing to City College Norwich in 2006/07. A steering group for the 'League for Learning Peer Referencing Pilot Project' was formed in 2005 and consists of a senior management representative (hereafter known as a 'peer review appointee') from each League

member college. The steering group meet on a monthly basis and report to the League for Learning Principals' group which meets quarterly.

2.2 THE LEAGUE FOR LEARNING SELF-REGULATION PILOT PROJECT

The League for Learning *Self-Regulation* Pilot Project is also known as the 'League for Learning *Peer Referencing* Pilot Project', or more commonly, as the 'League for Learning *Peer Review* Pilot Project' in this report. Originally led by West Nottinghamshire College, the leadership then passed to City College Norwich in April 2006. It was envisaged that being sufficiently geographically dispersed, colleges would be able to enter into a truly collaborative process without the impediment of a 'competitive market' that could be presented by a locally based college initiative. 'Peer review' is the term most commonly used in this report, although it should be stressed that it represents the more comprehensive set of activities defined by 'peer referencing' in Section 1.

2.3 THE PEER REVIEW PILOT PROJECT IN THE PLANNING STAGES

In November 2005, the project steering group first met to discuss recent updates in national developments relevant to FE (*e.g.* see Section 1) and to formulate the project design and brief as a result of this discussion. It was envisaged that the concept of peer review would involve:

- Verification of the Self-Assessment Report (SAR)
- Testing the host college's judgements rather than providing judgements
- The opportunity for mature, professional dialogue for development
- Ensuring a process of quality improvement (NPRP, 2005a).

The decision was taken to pilot two frameworks amongst six of the L4L member colleges, the different groups forming according to the model that each college wished to trial:

GROUP ONE	GROUP TWO
1. Lewisham College	1. Doncaster College
2. City College Norwich	2. Hull College
3. West Nottinghamshire College	3. North Hertfordshire College

Based upon the Common Inspection Framework (CIF)	Based upon the Business Excellence Model (BEM) and Common Inspection Framework (CIF)

Guildford College decided to observe these pilots rather than actively participate; Knowsley College was already involved in another peer referencing initiative with local colleges in the North West of England (the 'North West Colleges', Section 1) and agreed to report back to the steering group about the development of this project. This report is based only on the Group One framework.

2.4 PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aims of the L4L Pilot Project were (NPRP, 2005b):

- To use the Common Inspection Framework and to consider the use of the Business Excellence Model framework to review and conduct peer verification of the college's self-assessment grades

- To test the host college's judgement through a mature, professional dialogue for development and quality improvement.

Specifically the objectives were (NPRP, 2005b):

- To host a two day peer review at each college of the host's college's Self-Assessment Report (SAR)
- To follow-up each peer review with support from the partners for two to three days of development activities in areas for improvement
- To share good practice.

3. PROJECT EVALUATION AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The Research Centre, City College Norwich, was approached to conduct an independent review and critical evaluation of the L4L Peer Review framework trialled amongst the first group of colleges, namely Lewisham College, City College Norwich and West Nottinghamshire College. Being funded equally by all three colleges, the evaluation took place from February to the end of July 2006 with the aim of documenting and providing a narrative of the learning processes taking place for the colleges and individual participants throughout the project.

The specific objectives of the evaluation, relating to the Group One framework only, were to:

- Assess whether the original strategic aims and objectives of the project were achieved according to key priorities in the delivery plan
- Assess the overall impact of the project on the participants and organisations
- Draw out examples of best practice and lessons learnt from the project in order to help inform future programmes and policy
- Describe any unexpected outcomes both good and bad
- Investigate the sustainability of the programme of collaborative self-regulation
- Produce an accessible report which provides readable and practical information.

4. METHODOLOGY

The research methodology adopted needed to be adaptive and responsive, in order to evaluate effectively an organic, developmental project such as this. Therefore the research design sought to follow a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1973), an inductive methodology that enables emergent themes identified through thematic analysis of the data to focus progressively the data collection (Parlett and Hamilton, 1976). This allows for the views of participants to shape the direction that the research takes. As explained above, part of the role of researcher in this project was to objectify the development of peer review, by recording the journey its participants took and assessing how well the project aims and objectives were being achieved. At the same time, the researcher participated to a degree in the action research cycle by reporting back observations and preliminary findings to the peer review teams to facilitate the effective development of the project.

In keeping with this approach, a variety of research methodologies were adopted to gather data for the evaluation and to allow for triangulation of the results including:

- A review and analysis of project documentation and related literature

- Field observation and qualitative data collection (*i.e.* attendance at the peer review of each of the three colleges and at other key meetings and events, such as monthly steering group meetings and the L4L Festival)
- Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with key stakeholders (*e.g.* principals, peer reviewers, each host college's peer review appointee, members of teaching and management staff in curriculum/cross-college areas that were reviewed, students).

4.1 REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF PROJECT DOCUMENTATION AND RELATED LITERATURE

Project documentation consisting of the project specification, meeting minutes, progress reports, presentations and handouts arising from the Preparation Event (Section 5.3), relevant e-mail communication between participant colleges and paperwork associated with each peer review (*e.g.* college and curriculum area SARs, Post Inspection Action Plans, review briefings and the written feedback following reviews) were made available to the researcher. A brief literature review of contextual issues relevant to the project was also undertaken (Section 1).

4.2 FIELD OBSERVATION AND QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

Field research was facilitated through attendance at the peer review of each of the three colleges (Section 6) and at other key meetings and events, such as the monthly steering group meetings, the Preparation Event and the L4L Festival. This enabled the collection of contextual, qualitative data for the evaluation and supported the process of gathering feedback via more structured means, such as evaluation forms, used at the Preparation Event and L4L Festival and discussed below.

4.3 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS AND QUESTIONNAIRES WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS AND EVENT EVALUATION FORMS

Key stakeholders surveyed during the course of the project included college principals, peer reviewers, the peer review appointee at each college, members of teaching and management staff in the curriculum/cross-college areas that were reviewed and students. Data arising from surveys was gathered at various stages of the project, for example, prior to any peer review events taking place (from the three nominees and potential 'peer reviewers'), from participants at key events such as before and after the Peer Review Preparation Event (Sections 5.3 and 5.4.2) and the L4L Festival (Section 7.1) as well as in the period immediately following the peer review of colleges. Those surveyed in the latter case included principals, senior managers, teaching staff, individuals in the peer review teams and the peer review appointee at each host college. In total, 23 interviews were held and there were 39 responses to questionnaires. In terms of the evaluation forms used at the Preparation Event and L4L Festival, these were reliant on participants completing them both at the start and end of the event. As a result, 53 responses could be included for research purposes.

4.4 ADDITIONAL PARTICIPATION BY RESEARCHER

As part of the ongoing evaluative, action research process, the researcher was also called upon to participate in the project itself by presenting initial research and participant feedback during the 'Peer Review Project' session at the L4L festival and during the Lewisham peer review event. In addition, a brief interim report on the project was produced in June 2006 in the form of a short article for dissemination at the QIA conference.

4.5 ETHICAL CONCERNS

To adhere to ethical research practice, subjects interviewed during the course of the research who expressed their personal opinions or views were asked for their informed

consent and were provided with a participant information sheet. Information provided by all stakeholders, whether expressing personal opinion or not, has been treated confidentially and is reported here anonymously.

5. THE PEER REVIEW PILOT PROJECT IN THE INITIAL STAGES

5.1 THE COLLEGES INVOLVED

As previously mentioned, the three participating colleges in the peer review model under evaluation here were City College Norwich, Lewisham College and West Nottinghamshire College. Contextual information about these colleges can be found from their websites: www.ccn.ac.uk, www.lewisham.ac.uk and www.westnotts.ac.uk. In order to protect the anonymity of these colleges, reportage on the peer review process at each refers to College 'A,' 'B' and 'C' but in no way does this correspond with the order in which they are referred to above.

5.2 PROJECT PLANNING

The researcher was first introduced to the project in late January 2006, being de-briefed by one of the host college nominees and later by two of the participant college principals. It was explained that the project would involve participating colleges critically analysing the Self-Assessment Report (SAR) of one another and that a key difference of peer review from the way in which the Common Inspection Framework was envisaged (a judgement forming process) would arise through peers entering into the process of verifying the judgements of that college in practice. This would mean that areas for development could be identified for the colleges in question. A key outcome of the project would be the sharing of good practice between colleges. At this point, the project was still in its infancy but it was envisaged that:

- Those entering into the peer review process would not be known as 'inspectors' as this term would be laden with negative connotations associated with an Ofsted inspection. As stated above, the process of peer review was to steer away from an inspectorial approach. Subsequently, the term that did develop to describe these individuals was 'peer reviewers'
- There would be a body of potential peer reviewers (perhaps eight or nine) at each college with the necessary skills, experience and preparation needed to participate in the teams for each peer review event
- The process would flexibly fit to each college's desired outcome of peer review and would also be adapted to meet the needs of the reviewing colleges
- Staff in those areas chosen for review would have the opportunity to shape the direction of their area. Ofsted inspections tend to indicate to staff where they are doing well or achieving less well but do not provide any suggestions on how to sustain good 'performance' or raise poorer performance. Peer review would be about professional respect and integrity. Staff would learn from one another on issues that work in practical terms and this would therefore build opportunities for staff development.

At this point, the researcher was provided with various project documents, for example, detailing the minutes of previous steering group meetings, the project aims and objectives (Section 2.4) and the proposed set of common protocols for all participating colleges involved to include (NPRP (2005a):

- Respecting the unique nature and practice of each college

- To uphold confidentiality through the concept of the 'Chatham House Rule' and to agree between the host college and the reviews what should be shared across all members
- To develop common minimal paperwork and report styles
- To complete a 'memorandum of agreement' for each college, identifying the commitment to the pilots including the release of staff, commitment to support staff 'training' for the pilot and to share practice
- The recognition that each participant in the pilot is a learner
- The acceptance of an open culture of receiving and giving feedback which is constructive, honest and rigorous.

It was intended that peer reviewers would complete a project diary throughout the course of the project to facilitate the effective 'review and evaluation of the pilot as both a formative and summative process' (Appendix 1).

5.3 PROJECT PREPARATION

Prior to any peer review events taking place, a 'Peer Review Preparation Event' was held which was attended by representatives (*e.g.* nominees and potential 'peer reviewers') from all participating League for Learning colleges in the project. The purpose of this event was to inform participants of the developments in the project, to share with them how the project was moving forward and to show how this project would positively benefit them. This was achieved through the following themes which aimed to:

- Discuss the national context for self-regulation
- Clarify the peer review process and framework
- Agree the protocols and ground rules
- Reach a common understanding on practices for recording, reporting, giving and receiving constructive feedback
- Disseminate the planned approach of the first peer review by the host college
- Discuss the support that peer reviewers suggested they would need.

One session was held on each of the above themes, presented by the peer review nominee at each college. From the observations of the researcher, these sessions were intended to be interactive, with participants there to learn about the ethos of peer review as envisaged within this project (and how it was intended to differ from inspection) and at the same time their involvement was expected to help shape the project and the direction it would take. Participants were able to voice suggestions and concerns and to enter into discussion with the nominees and one another. The event was characterised by openness, transparency and professional dialogue. This section presents a brief summary of each session and any important emergent themes from the day as a whole. The presentation on the first peer review is not reported here as it relates to the framework being piloted by the other group of colleges.

5.3.1 THE NATIONAL CONTEXT FOR SELF-REGULATION

Essentially, the session explored the themes discussed in Section 1, such as the position of the AoC and LSC, the findings of the Foster Review (Foster, 2005), the recent changes with regard to Ofsted and the inception of the League for Learning Peer Review Pilot. The presentation began with the statement 'peer review or self-regulation is a component leading to quality improvement' and the question 'what is self-regulation?'. Overall the feedback from the group was that self-regulation is 'a positive course of action that enables a good starting point for the improvement of quality'. In seeking to deny some concerns expressed by certain agencies in the sector that peer review would turn out to be simply an exercise of 'patting ourselves on the

back', the nominee presenting this session stressed the validity of this approach with the following statement:

> *"We have to be brutally honest [with one another] … it's about non-disguise and credibility … we need to demonstrate that we are rigorous and robust."*

The presentation also emphasised two further intended outcomes of peer review: firstly, that it would differ from Ofsted Inspection in being about 'verification', rather than 'assessment' of each institution; secondly, that it would lead to staff development and the sharing of good practice across the sector, achieved through the re-building of working relationships between institutions that had been lost since the incorporation of FE colleges.

5.3.2   CLARIFYING THE PEER REVIEW PROCESS AND FRAMEWORK

This session explored four themes: the purpose of peer review, its focus, the make-up of the peer review teams and how the process would work. Each of these aspects is summarised below:

- Self assessment is a process leading to improvement. However, it is important to consider whether 'self assessment is accurate' and whether 'subsequent improvement actions are accurately targeted and effective'. It was envisaged that peer review would support these processes by validating a college's self assessment and evaluating the effectiveness of their quality assurance procedures and self-assessment and quality improvement processes
- The host college would formulate the focus of the review and this could consist of one or more teaching areas, a key question (or a sub-set of a key question) from the CIF, the work of one or more support teams and/or particular college processes. A memorandum of agreement, devised by the host college, would provide detail of the focus and programme of the review
- Peer review teams would consist of four to eight members, including a team leader for one of the reviewing colleges with input from the nominee at the host college
- The process would involve a two day review with an initial team meeting on 'Day One'. Some preliminary documentation would be available to the team prior to the review and the team would collect and evaluate evidence by interviewing managers, teachers and students, scrutinising documentation and observing classes. The outcome of the review would be verbal and written feedback to the host college
- The key principles of peer review were as follows:
  - o It would be a collaborative process involving peers
  - o It would focus on areas determined by the host college
  - o It would work upon evaluative judgements based on evidence
  - o It would be specifically directed at helping improvement
  - o It would place emphasis on listening to the voice of the learners.

Participants were asked to feed back their thoughts on this framework. Some concerns were expressed. These are detailed below ('Q') with the response ('A') from the panel of nominees.

Q.   *"How can this process be differentiated from Ofsted?"*
A.   *"There will need to be significant commitment and responsibility for follow-up support … Amongst one group of colleges, the planning meeting has already identified that such follow-up would be provided by*

Curriculum Support …[peer review] will share good practice, [unlike inspection]."

Q. *"How are we going to benefit from peer review and take it forward? This needs to stated in the key principles."*

A. *"It's going to be about validating <u>success</u> and areas for improvement."*

Q. "*There needs to be a break between the two day review and the opportunity for feedback. Allowing time for reflection might produce better quality feedback?"*

A. *"[It is intended that] feedback will be given on day three following the [peer review team] meeting at the end of the second day."*

Q. "*Why does the host college chose the area(s) for review? This doesn't seem to be a rigorous way of doing this. Will the areas be representative of the college and what agenda will be behind these choices?"*

A. *"We are taking a longer term view of peer review and self-regulation. This has to be seen as different from Ofsted inspections and a chance for staff development. The focus following inspection, in terms of action plans, is often to tackle the negatives. We also need to consolidate on the strengths – this is what peer review should be aiming to do ... Credibility [in the peer review process] will come from the professional dialogue and ongoing discussion [that results]."*

5.3.3 AGREEING THE PROTOCOLS AND GROUND RULES

The protocols presented at the Preparation Event, which had been designed to provide operational guidance to those participating in peer review, had developed from those initially envisaged by the steering group (Section 5.2). The developed protocols were as follows:

- Respect the unique nature and practice of each participating college
- Uphold confidentiality and agree with the host college what should be shared amongst partners and stakeholders
- Accept an open culture of receiving and giving feedback which is constructive, honest and rigorous
- At all times, act professionally and to the highest standards of the further education sector
- Offer and receive considered professional advice through discussion and dialogue, based upon clear evidence or practice
- Recognise that there is no one 'best' model and participants are all learners in a process which encourages them to build upon their experience.

The latter three protocols were new or developed points from the earlier drafted version. Participants at the Preparation Event were asked to comment on these and to offer suggestions for their further development. Examples of such suggestions included:

- To approach peer review with objectivity
- To share all information through a portfolio of good practice from all colleges which would be available electronically
- To agree on the documentation that would be available before a peer review
- To provide the host college with profiles of each reviewer prior to peer review
- To ensure the effective preparation and planning of all staff coming into contact with peer review.

The process of setting the ground rules stimulated considerable discussion and appeared effectively to crystallise a common, conceptual approach to peer review in the minds of those present. As a result of this session, the notes from the suggested additions or adaptations to the protocols were typed up and circulated amongst relevant colleges. However, to the researcher's knowledge these were not used formally to update the protocols.

5.3.4 RECORDING, REPORTING, GIVING AND RECEIVING CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

This session presented guidance on how best to give constructive feedback, suggesting for example, that this could be achieved if it was clear, specific, positive, prioritised and owned (*i.e.* presented as one's own observations rather than a general viewpoint in FE). Feedback should give the host college choices and cover issues that could be changed. In terms of receiving feedback, hosts of peer review were advised to 'listen (without comment), seek clarification (at the end), respond (*e.g.* through an improvement plan) and record (reflect)'. This information was also provided in a comprehensive handout. A proforma 'Record of Activity' sheet was circulated amongst the attendees (Appendix 2). This was designed to record the 'judgements', 'areas of good practice' and 'areas for improvement and how to improve' with regard to different types of activities observed by the peer reviewers. According to the presentation, it was anticipated that 'final report judgements, good practice and areas for improvement would be easily traced through activity forms'. Attendees were asked for their feedback on this document and the following issues were raised:

- 'Judgements' as a statement was perceived to be too negative. 'Evaluative statements' was suggested as an alternative
- 'Areas for improvement' was also seen to have connotations and it was suggested that 'areas of agreement' or 'areas for development' should replace it
- Some clarification was needed regarding the nature of the language to be used. For example, were reviewers to avoid inspectorial language such as 'satisfactory'.
- There was a need for a development plan to be agreed between the host college and peer reviewers following the review
- The form needed to be developed to include space for recording notes and learner views and a reference column to indicate the source or evidence of dialogue
- There was no plan to make these records available to those directly involved with the activities observed or meetings held (*e.g.* teachers, management staff). Written feedback would arise from these forms and be presented to senior management.

Overall, these forms seemed to be problematic, presenting different issues for different people. Attendees also raised two important points:

- What opportunity would the host college have to feed back to the peer review team?
- What opportunity would there be to re-visit issues raised by the peer review?

Both points presented issues for careful considered by the nominees at each college. In addition, for reference purposes, four 'Evidence Example Forms' were provided. These were suggested models for the recording of teaching and learning observations. They were structured to provide information about the context of the teaching, a summary evaluation and the evidence of teaching, learning and attainment.

5.3.5 SUPPORT ISSUES

The last session asked attendees to identify any further support they would like to be available for peer review. Participants suggested:

- Information and/or dialogue prior to the peer review (*e.g.* what are the host organisation's expectations and how did they select the focus for review?)
- The chance for a confidence-building 'mock' peer review exercise
- To ensure competency amongst all in the peer review team other individuals may need to be drafted in with the relevant skills or experience
- To build in more time for the review to allow for reflection by the host college and peer review team
- Some guidance on making and writing evaluative judgements using non-inspectorial language
- To share the experience of the first peer review.

5.3.6 EVALUATING THE PREPARATION EVENT

A total of 33 individuals completed evaluation forms at the start and end of the day, although the total number of people in attendance was slightly higher. The evaluation forms were designed to measure the 'distance travelled' by participants on certain issues covered during the course of the event, thereby demonstrating how effective the event was in preparing individuals for the peer review process. The issues covered by the evaluation forms linked to the three more didactic sessions of:

1) The National Context for Self-Regulation
2) Clarifying the Peer Review Process and Framework
3) Recording, Reporting, Giving and Receiving Constructive Feedback.

Individuals were asked to respond to three positive statements by choosing their level of agreement with each statement according to a six point scale, from strongly disagree (1) through to strongly agree (6). These statements are presented in Table 1 and Figure 1.

The aggregated score for responses to each statement demonstrated a significant increase from the start to the end of the day (Figure 1, Table 1) and suggests that the event had a successful and positive impact on participants in preparing them for peer review.

Statement	% agreeing or strongly agreeing	
	START	END
'I can identify what the peer review process involves'	33	91
'I can give and receive constructive feedback with regard to peer review'	21	91
'I can explain the national context for self-regulation'	27	82

Table 1: Success of the Preparation Event, evidenced by the increase in percentages of those participants who responded positively to the evaluative statements.

Questionnaires sent out following the event, to nominees and potential peer reviewers who had been in attendance from the three colleges in the evaluation, also suggested the Preparation Event successfully achieved its intended outcome of informing participants of developments to the project and its benefits. This is explored in Section 5.4.

I can identify what the peer review process involves

I can give and receive constructive feedback with regard to peer review

I can explain the national context for self-regulation

N.B. 1= Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Slightly Disagree, 4 = Slightly Agree, 5 = Agree, 6 = Strongly Agree.
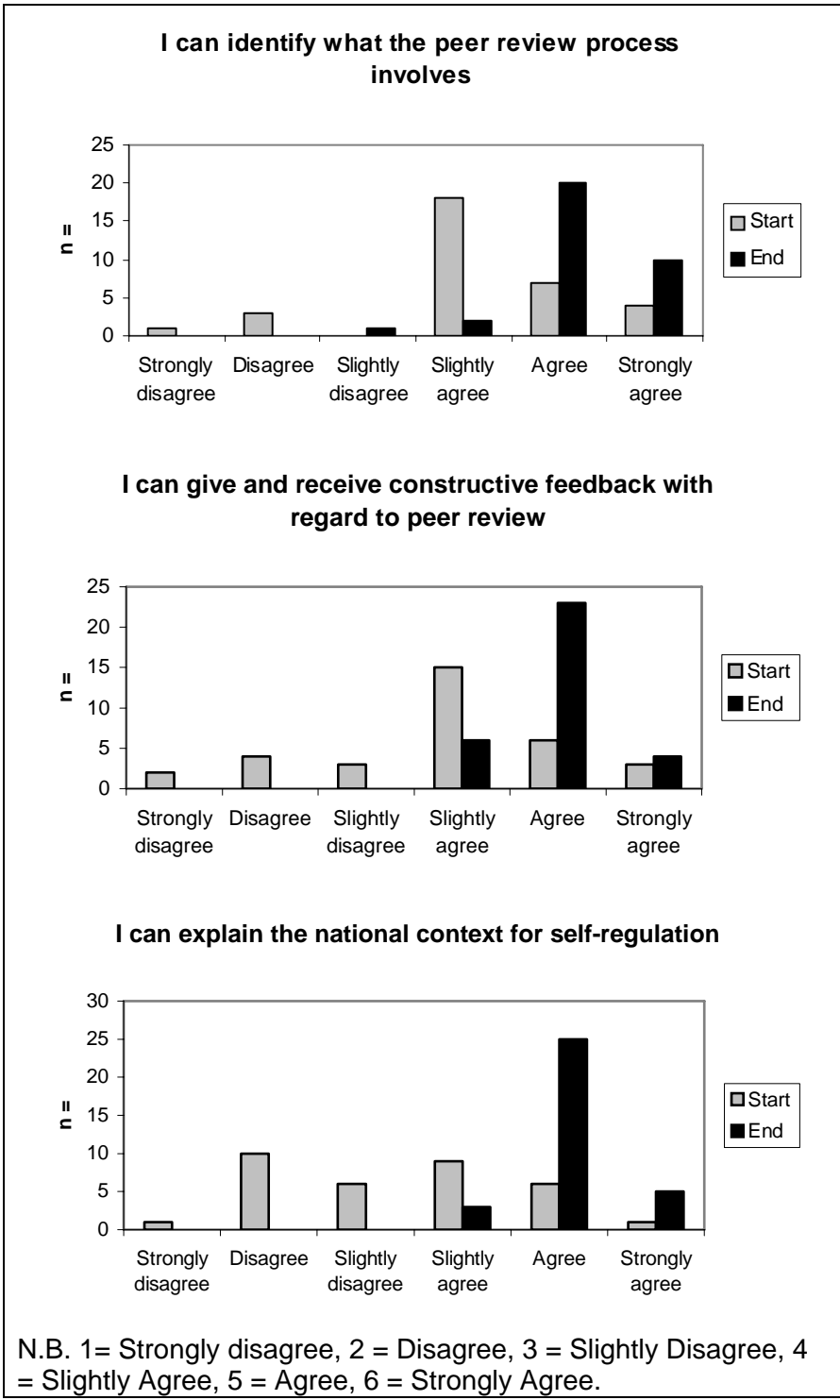
Figure 1: Bar charts demonstrating the distance travelled by participants as a result of the Preparation Event.

5.4   EARLY THOUGHTS: ADDITIONAL FEEDBACK ON THE CONCEPT OF PEER REVIEW

In addition to the feedback expressed at the Preparation Event (Section 5.3), the nominees, principals and potential peer reviewers were surveyed via questionnaire or interview to gather an impression of their thoughts on a range of issues prior to any peer review events taking place (*e.g.* their hopes and concerns for the project, their understanding of the project aims and objectives and what they perceived would be its

short and long-term impacts). Responses from 19 individuals were received. These are grouped accordingly below.

5.4.1   RESPONSE FROM PRINCIPALS AND NOMINEES

Both nominees who responded to the survey, indicated that they felt the Preparation Event had gone well, or very well, and that they had personally found it very useful, for example:

> *"[It offered] an opportunity to solve ideas and to contribute to the development of the process. [It was] interesting to hear the different approaches/priorities from different organisations. [It is] exciting to be part of such as major development."*

They also felt that one important impact of the event on the intended peer review process was the need to make some changes to paperwork, such as moving away from the use of inspectorial language towards an emphasis on the sharing of good practice.

Principals and nominees were confident of what they saw the aims and the objectives of the project to be and these centred around the verification of other college's own (self-assessment) judgements, the building of effective working partnerships with chosen, respected peers, the creation of a professional dialogue and to facilitate quality improvement now and give some consideration to its mechanism in the future:

> *"Not to make judgements but to check how we are making judgements about ourselves through working with our 'friends' in the sense that they share the same values, the same sense about the importance of learning, same sense of 21st century public service. The point is that although they [the other colleges] are our peers, they are 'respected' peers. Partnership in this day and age is often compulsory but this is about choosing to work with those who you admire professionally."*

> *"To experiment with the concept of peer review and self-regulation through a process. To evaluate the outcomes in order to put forward some recommendations about how peer review and self-regulation may benefit the FE system within the future."*

> *"To drive quality improvement through professional dialogue based around self-assessment."*

All principals were clear about the part they would play in this project, that their role was to lead strategically (having appointed nominees at each college to effect its facilitation) and to enthuse colleagues about the process:

> *"My whole role [i.e. generally] is as a person who leads learning in the organisation. Leadership of learning is about wondering and noticing and navigating the way through in the spirit of enquiry. I have authorised those facilitating the project."*

> *"I need to lead the college's support for it, that it's a really good thing … [like saying to them] 'come on people lets get involved'. It's leading it but not necessarily in an operational way but in a strategic way, in terms of ethos and culture."*

> *"[I am] to lead the strategic development of peer review and self-regulation across the college, within the League for Learning and at a national level with the AoC, LSC and QIA."*

Effective management and professional trust appeared to be a strong theme in the project from the outset. For example, one of the nominees later commented that not having the direct involvement of principals in the project, as they had placed responsibility for its successful facilitation with the nominees, demonstrated a considerable measure of professional trust in the nominees' abilities. This was later supported by two principals who both agreed with this reasoning, for example when one commented on whether terms of reference had been agreed for all participants:

> *"I assume that they have. This is not meant as a measure of neglect but as a measure of trust. I trust the professionalism of my colleagues to have agreed this."*

The opportunity to work within a chosen partnership to share ideas and expertise was an important aspect of the project for one principal:

> *"[I've] longed for the opportunity to work with like-minded colleges and [have] the experience of being side by side with other colleges, serving the learner to achieve excellence. [Signing up to the project] was about the spirit of innovation and practical wisdom and working with colleges who weren't 'graded' the same as us but who had similar values which would lead to a sense of belonging. Currently there is a death of discretion. However, this project is about the professional arena."*

Principals were passionate about their hopes for the benefits to their college as a result of this project, citing the sharing and promotion of good practice, the advancement of self-evaluation and the benefit to learners as ideal outcomes:

> *"[I hope it will] bring in a new layer of expertise, new improved behaviour, bring a richer texture to discussions, for example 'I saw such and such at this college and it was great' … a 'hop on' effect, leading to motivation and the animation of ideas … However, it is important that we keep students at the centre of this process."*

> *"There are two levels [to what I hope will happen]. One, that it will actually get knowledge and good practice from other institutions. Two, I want the actual process of learning to self evaluation – these are the things that the college really want to do, and I don't mean me or the nominee, but for academic staff to want this too. I want it to create a positive culture around peer review. That's my biggest aspiration."*

> *"I hope it will improve the processes of self-evaluation, demonstrate its capacity to improve, improve the experience of the learners and identify and promote best practice."*

In turn, this would lead to positive short and long-term impacts, such as raising standards, regaining a measure of self-government and giving credit to the professional judgements of those working directly within the field.

> *"Classrooms have become 'a goldfish bowl of professional life' – for example through Ofsted inspections and other policies, whereby those looking in don't understand what is actually going on in that situation. So*

it's about returning the authority to the classroom and reasserting the primacy of professionals in making their own judgements."

"Eventually it should really raise standards and ultimately that we have better student success, that's my ultimate goal in everything I do. This has to be about raising standards. I hope it will also create a culture of openness and willingness to both be looked at and look at others. The process itself needs to be a positive, constructive, developmental process and that's quite a challenge in itself."

Of the three principals surveyed, two made the following comments when asked if they had any concerns:

"There are various things going on at the moment [that the college is involved in] which mean that resources could get stretched. I would be foolish not to invest in the future but it's about whether or not I am putting the creativity of my staff in the right place. I think I am but it's a working hypothesis."

"Yes. Well it [the project] could backfire. That could be very negative. It could be that the areas we chose feel that they are being picked upon. I think I'm also worried that we will lose the learning but now … [we have a research element involved] I'm not so worried about that. For me it has to be something that I can give to the wider college community not just the areas that are going through the process this year. So a worry is that it won't be replicable."

The third principal had no concerns as 'it is an excellent concept and first class project.'

Despite any concerns, strong support for the project, evident in the significant investment of resources, came from their belief in its intrinsic value:

"I think that peer review is a real model for quality improvement and therefore the investment is so cost effective and [represents] value for money."

"[Peer review is] the next generation of quality assurance. It will give the sector as a whole, once we have some working models, a new stature."

In terms of their viewpoint on the future progression of the project, some clear issues of sustainability for further consideration were voiced:

"It is the implementation and roll out which I am really interested in. There are some points for discussion regarding its sustainability. For example … I know how projects can be 'establishmentised'. We have to consider what the trade off is in getting it [peer review] across the sector."

"I hope it [the project] will be supported nationally, I don't mean necessarily our model but the idea of peer review. I'm sure you are aware there's other pilots I think going on nationally. I genuinely hope that having the research aspect to it will stand us in good stead in putting ourselves forward as something to be looked at in a wider context. I just hope that the sustainability will be that peer review will be accepted by the LSC as an integral part of quality improvement, for the outcomes of

peer review will be legitimate evidence based data that the LSC will use
for their appraisal of institutions. It's got quite significant potential."

5.4.2 RESPONSE FROM POTENTIAL PEER REVIEWERS
A questionnaire was forwarded, via nominees at each college, to all potential peer reviewers, to ascertain how they had been identified to participate in the project, whether they had attended the Preparation Event, if they were confident of what the peer review project would involve and felt adequately briefed of their role and responsibility within this process and to identify any of their hopes or concerns. All fourteen people who responded had attended the Preparation Event which appeared to have positively impacted on these individuals:

- Twelve out of fourteen respondents (86%) indicated that they were confident of the purpose of the peer review process as envisaged by the L4L project, and what it would entail
- Eight individuals had been nominated to take part and six people had volunteered or been invited to participate. All respondents saw this as a potentially positive experience, citing the opportunity to be 'at the cutting edge', 'to gain an insight into FE in other establishments' and 'to contribute to an improvement in the quality of provision at the host and my own college' as reasons for wanting to be involved
- Thirteen respondents out of fourteen (93%) felt confident about reviewing the SAR or specific areas of learning identified by the host college. As regards giving feedback on both these aspects, twelve individuals (86%) felt confident with respect to the SAR and all were confident concerning the areas of learning. Reasons for a lack of confidence on these issues related to the individual's apprehension about their ability to cope in another organisation if faced with a subject specialism outside of their own, a lack of experience and a need for more guidance on reviewing the college-wide SAR.

On the whole, respondents welcomed the chance to be involved in the process, especially having the opportunity to make an impact in the developmental stages of the project. By far, individuals were most looking forward to visiting their colleagues in other organisations and sharing ideas and experiences of good practice which would enrich teaching and learning and create professional networks. This fostering of a professional dialogue, offering a fresh perspective from outside the host college to potentially sector-wide issues, was the area that people also felt was going to work particularly well in the project:

> *"It is a very exciting project that could benefit all parties involved and help to foster a more cooperative and less competitive nature between colleges. I feel that closer collaboration and sharing of good practice between the different areas of delivery will eventually raise standards across all colleges involved."*

Nevertheless, there was some concern amongst half of the respondents as to whether they were sufficiently briefed regarding their expected role and responsibilities during the peer review process. Seven respondents (50%) did not feel that they had been adequately prepared. Essentially, this stemmed from the fact that the project was still evolving and certain issues or approaches had not yet been fully decided. Individuals wanted to be assured that there would be sufficient time to prepare for the role of peer reviewer, with the chance to read relevant documentation and establish a dialogue with the host college before the review took place. However, one respondent saliently indicated that the organic nature of the project meant that these issues would only be resolved through practice:

> *"The project is developmental and part of the excitement is that it is embryonic and therefore will evolve over time. There may be lots of questions at present but we will only arrive at the answers by going through the process. A great example of 'learning through doing'!"*

Furthermore, there was some slight trepidation about certain aspects of the project:

> *"I am a little concerned that some people want the process to be too much of a partnership approach and too comfortable. My feeling is that without rigour and challenge the process will not stand up to being a valid alternative to the current inspection process. I am also a little concerned about the extensive aftercare process and support which some people seem to want or expect."*

> *"The fact that the host college can decide which area(s) or aspect(s) to be reviewed is positive as part of the pilot programme but could be seen as less than positive once the review process is in full operation (i.e. the host college could 'hide' the weaker areas so as to gain a more favourable peer review)."*

Additionally, the concept that 'peer review' would involve peers at every level of the organisation was also challenged.

> *"[It] should be born in mind by those designing this project [that] its true value will be if colleagues being reviewed meet genuine peers not just quality managers like the ones they have in their own institutions, dance specialists talking to dance specialists etc. [for example]."*

More than one individual raised the concern that the time scale (*e.g.* two days) could be impracticable or impede the process. This could foster an unrealistic expectation of what could be achieved during such a short visit, possibly leading to an awkward situation:

> *"I do not wish to leave having told the colleagues I am reviewing nothing they did not know already and having taken up a significant amount of their time and energy. Given that I will spend very little time there this is a concern."*

One individual was also not looking forward to giving 'difficult news' which would be 'essential if the process is to be a rigorous evaluation framework'. For some it was a case of nervousness over their own abilities; overall, although the challenge this project presented was welcomed, they were concerned about being able to live up to the expectations of the host college and do justice to the project. Feelings such as this are understandable when embarking on a completely new venture.

Despite this, all individuals surveyed indicated that they were hoping to make positive personal achievements through their participation in the project. This ranged from 'making a contribution to a new and exciting project' to developing their skills and knowledge base and widening their understanding of practices across the sector:

> *"[I hope] to achieve a much greater understanding of issues surrounding the promotion and acquisition of quality associated with learning and education and to enable me to utilise the skills learned in my own*

working environment that will help to benefit and improve our own practices."

6. PEER REVIEW IN PRACTICE: DOCUMENTING THE PROCESS AND THE LEARNING THAT TOOK PLACE

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The researcher was able to shadow and observe different peer reviewers during the course of each review. Therefore, the following discussion cannot offer a definitive record of the three peer review events in their entirety but does give an insight into how each pilot exercise unfolded.

Various issues impacted on the way in which the project developed between and during the course of each peer review. These issues ranged from the 'trial and error' approach taken with regard to the scheduling of activities and the way in which feedback was presented to the more complex, such as the specific context at each college at the time of the review, which was fundamental to the way in which the project was adopted and adapted accordingly. For example, during the first peer review, the college in question was undergoing significant changes to the senior leadership and management structure; the second college to host a peer review was also in the process of considerable change, in the form of an institutional review and the third college had only very recently received an Ofsted inspection and had yet to formulate fully their Post Inspection Action Plan (PIAP). As a result of each of these various situations, peer review was approached differently with the aim of bringing the maximum benefit to that organisation at that time.

The following discussion seeks to set out the focus of each review and to report on any key observations made by the researcher and participants with a view to documenting the learning that took place and the subsequent development of the project. It should be stressed that the role of research evaluation in this project was not to document the content of the written feedback following each review, but to consider how these observations were reached and how valuable they were to the organisation hosting the review. With this in mind, any quoted references to sensitive information, such as the content of written feedback, have been removed or anoymised to protect the confidentiality of the peer review teams and colleges involved. A significant amount of qualitative data was collected during the research which could not be feasibly included in the main body of the report. It is consequently summarised in many of the points expressed in this section. Nevertheless, the richness of the data was deemed to be so valuable that a large proportion of responses from host college participants to surveys has been included in Appendix 3 to demonstrate the significance of common themes running through the messages recorded by the research.

6.2 THE PEER REVIEW OF COLLEGE A

6.2.1 FOCUS OF REVIEW

In addition to a review of the effectiveness of the self-assessment process, the curriculum areas of Visual and Performing Arts and Work Based Learning, were also chosen for the peer review exercise. The briefing document requested that the peer review team address the following questions:

- How effective is the college self-assessment process and its self-assessment report?

- What improvements have been made in Work Based Learning (WBL), especially Engineering, and Business and Management since the last Ofsted inspection?
- What improvements have been made in Visual and Performing Arts (VPA) since the last Ofsted inspection?

<div align="right">(College A, 2006)</div>

It was suggested by the host college, that where possible, reviewers would work in pairs (*i.e.* one from each reviewing college). However, in practice, the peer review team consisted of five individuals, one from College B and four from College C. This meant that two pairs were available for each curriculum area and one individual focused on the cross-college self-assessment process.

The reviewers of curriculum areas and Work Based Learning were requested to focus their efforts on assessing the effectiveness of each curriculum SAR in ensuring improvements and whether improvements were taking place. Their starting point was therefore the curriculum SAR and action plan. Reviewers were asked to consider:

- Are the objectives appropriate and how effectively are they being addressed?
- What support do managers and teaching staff receive from the Head of Centre, Curriculum Team Leaders, Learning Consultants, the Learning and Teaching Improvement Manager and others?
- What factors hinder rather than assist improvement?
- What is the impact on improving learning and teaching, attendance, retention and pass rates?
- Is the level of improvement sufficient and at the right pace?

The peer review schedule was devised so that the team had the opportunity for interviews with teaching and management staff, observation of teaching and assessment practices, meetings with stakeholders (*e.g.* learners and employers) and scrutiny of documentation and records. It was requested by the host college that classroom observations or sampling would not be graded.

The focus of the review on the overall self-assessment process and SAR should:

> *"Be on the effectiveness of the central mechanisms to support quality improvement through both the rigour and robustness of self-assessment reports themselves, but also in the achievement of the subsequent SAR action plans".* (College A, 2006)

Two days were allowed to achieve all of these peer review activities, including the initial briefing by the host college and the verbal feedback session from the visiting review team.

On the subject of feedback, the host college requested that the outcome of each part of the review should be a short written report, no more than four, single pages, which addressed each of the following central questions:

- How effective is the SAR process and the SAR?
- What improvements have been made since inspection?
- What needs to be done to make more improvement?

During the briefing, the host college stressed their desire to know whether there was a sense of ownership over improvements and a culture of 'moving forward'.

The above demonstrates the thoroughness of the briefing provided by the host college and the clear outcomes they wished to achieve from the peer review exercise. In addition to this, the nominee at the host college made two further key points during the briefing:

> *"Push us, challenge us, move us forward. Be honest. We have high expectations [at this college], so should you [of us]".*

> *"We don't want the peer review to be 'soft', it needs to be honest and have added value to [Ofsted] inspections which means that professional dialogue is an outcome."*

The briefing session also allowed for the peer review team to ask questions of representatives of the host college, resulting in open and honest discourse between all parties concerned. For example, one of the peer reviewers was keen to find out what staff feeling was concerning the review. The response was that although staff were slightly apprehensive, they were generally positive with the added guidance that there was a need in the peer review exercises to move away from a 'culture of being weighed' and an inspectorial approach. Another question concerned the reasons for choosing the curriculum areas. The host college replied that they would like to use the peer review to assess whether or not both areas had moved forward since the last time they had been awarded their overall grades.

6.2.2   FEEDBACK BY PARTICIPANTS

The peer review had been presented to the curriculum areas for review as a chance to be 'at the forefront of education' and these individuals therefore saw this is as a positive opportunity. Nevertheless, some anxiety amongst these subject areas was noted by the peer review team at the start of the review, by a perceived desire to manage the situation with a busy schedule of planned activities. When peer reviewers subsequently indicated that some of these exercises were to be dropped from the programme to give greater scope to examine the issues that interested them, a slight sense of unnerve amongst the curriculum areas was noted. This soon proved to be a beneficial change to the schedule, with peer reviewers taking the opportunity to adapt the time to suit their needs:

> *"I thought [the peer review] went very much to my expectations. My expectation was initially that there would be tremendous amount of anxiety and then it would turn round and become supportive and I felt that that did happen .... for the college, as the first one hosting a peer review, they would have been anxious. For example the first exercise that my colleague and I saw was a very heavily managed event. We said 'we're not going to do that, we're going to do this' and that totally surprised them. If someone is coming to look at your college you're going to try and manage it. I am writing the timetables for the peer review at my college and already I feel that I am managing their time too much, that I should be allowing more free time. You need to do this though, to stand back and say that they are professional people, let them do their thing."*
>   - Peer Reviewer

To their credit, the host college were entirely flexible and did facilitate these changes. For example:

> *"We were given permission to experiment here … [the host college] was very receptive to this."*
>   - Peer Reviewer

One beneficial change to the programme identified by a peer reviewer was having the opportunity to 'go 'walkabout' and talk to students and staff at random'. Additionally, aspects of the process that peer reviewers particularly appreciated was the chance to work with colleague(s) from another organisation and being able to see how a particular subject specialism was delivered in another college.

Hence, the first peer review, described as being 'validating' and 'enlightening' by two of the peer reviewers, was deemed to have been a positive and useful process overall with clear potential to develop constructively in future exercises:

> *"If we can have a solid base in the first step or stage of peer review then we can only develop the system or relationship positively from here."*
> - Peer Reviewer

> *"[Originally] I was dreading it [the thought peer review] … [but] we managed to get rid of the ghosts of inspection and move forward".*
> - Manager of curriculum area under review

Indeed, peer review was deemed to be nothing like Ofsted inspection. It was seen to involve professional dialogue, the sharing of ideas and information and have the same level of integrity and professionalism of inspection (*e.g.* see Appendix 3):

> *"The fact that this is a two-way, mutually beneficial process ensures the integrity of peer review".* - Manager of curriculum area under review

Individuals in the host college spoke very highly of the 'professionalism and insight' of the peer reviewers, describing them as 'superb' and 'very positive'. The nominee at the host college admired the considered approach the peer review team had taken, commenting that personally it was the 'biggest learning step in the last few days [s/he had observed]':

> *"This [peer review] has been done with us and not to us"*

Upon reflection, the value of this approach was also pointed out by one of the peer review team:

> *"With inspection, [inspectors] come in with pre-set ideas and you have to prove otherwise. With peer review it's the opposite situation. The peer review team have no pre-conceived notions. It's about being open-minded and coming to certain conclusions by the end of the review."*

Indeed, the peer review team were quite clear about the non-inspectorial approach they intended to take. For example:

> *"We are not here to make judgements … we aren't suggesting 'areas for improvement or recommendations' but 'areas to look at further'".*

A conscious awareness of steering away from the role of inspectors was articulated clearly by other peer review team members too.

The host college were overwhelmed by the richness and insightful nature of the feedback:

> *"[The] analysis is insightful, focussed and constructive … [I am] astounded by just how detailed the feedback is and by how deeply and how far they [the peer reviewers] have gone in their review."*

> *"I am staggered by how much you [the peer review team] have absorbed in such a short time. You have covered so much. I can really understand some of the points you made, they really ring true. The feedback was really rich. Thank you."*

The ability to reach such constructive observations about the host college should be credited to the honesty of its staff:

> *"The openness of staff allowed us to drill down to those important levels."*
>
> <div align="right">- Peer Reviewer</div>

6.2.3 UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES AND LESSONS LEARNT

In addition to the sensitive and respectful approach the peer review team took during the first review which has already been noted as a learning step above, there were some other unexpected outcomes/learning points:

> *"I've had the richest professional dialogue in a long time and this was not an outcome I necessarily expected."*
>
> <div align="right">- Peer Reviewer</div>

As can be noted from the comment earlier, this dialogue was of value to reviewers and hosts alike, it was a 'two-way, mutually beneficial process'.

Interestingly, another unforeseen outcome came to light during discussion at the feedback session, when both parties (*i.e.* the host college and the peer review team) revealed that they had felt 'intimidated' by one another before the review; the host college because it was in the position of allowing outsiders into the college to examine their systems and practices, and the peer review team because they felt they had to live up to the expectations of the host college. Essentially, the researcher noted that this created a 'balanced relationship', not something which happens during inspection. As a result, the desire by all those involved to give their best to the process was a clear outcome. One peer reviewer noted that at the end of day one, when spontaneously asked to engage in dialogue with one colleague from the host college and additionally to feed back their thoughts to the curriculum area, despite feeling drained by the fullness of that day's activities,

> *"I raised my game. I owed it to them [the curriculum area]."*

Those receiving this feedback welcomed the constructive suggestions it entailed. In fact, they found it so motivating that they made a start on implementing or investigating some of the suggested 'areas for consideration' the day immediately following the review, some even coming in early to work to do so.

A high level of commitment to the process by all staff involved was a common theme running through the peer review. Despite this, due to prior commitments, three members of the peer review team had to leave before the verbal feedback session and before they had a chance to formulate properly the nature of their feedback with colleagues in the peer review team. This had to be achieved via telephone (*i.e.* between some of the peer review team members) and therefore was not an ideal outcome of the review. The lack of closure this prompted was deemed to be a learning

point for improvement in future peer reviews, with the need to allow greater time in the schedule for feedback and reflection amongst the reviewing team being noted:

> *"[In terms of the operational side of the first peer review the learning points that I will be bringing to the peer review at my college are] one, the organisation – because it is a new activity we had nowhere to go from. Being presented with a file [for the peer review] that was complete [with relevant information] gave us a good starting point. It made us feel that it was a valued exercise. Two, we need to be careful about not over-managing the time. Three, we need to think about how a new team coming together are able to operate together not having worked with one another before. They need time to bond, to work out their methodology, their working strategy. Time is needed to round off at the end. At the first peer review … [some of the team] went away early and we didn't have the chance to catch up with them properly so I don't think we closed it down as a team effectively."*

Despite this, the peer reviewer commented that the feedback was 'fresh' and 'impactful' because of the way in which it had been arrived at. Even so, the steep learning curve presented by the review brought about the recognition that more time was also needed at the start of the process, to bring the peer review team together. The first event, although staged over two days, only allowed for a day and a half of review activities with the feedback being presented on the morning of the third day. This resulted in a situation whereby the peer review team was only able to offer verbal feedback. The written feedback was produced some weeks later, the host college, in the meantime, having to work from their own notes taken of the verbal feedback. This was not an ideal outcome but resulted, understandably, from the fact that peer reviewers were taking time out of working lives that were already full:

> *"I think it would be healthy to have had some written feedback [prepared earlier]. I think the fact that the lead reviewer hasn't been able to do that so far for a variety of very good reasons means that the feedback is extrapolated from the event and therefore whatever it says it may no longer have the currency."*

Notably, the written feedback was not produced according to the structure of the documentation originally designed, that which had been so problematic at the Preparation Event (Section 5.3). Instead it consisted of a series of observations, supported with explanations and evidence and presented without any order of priority. The use of judgemental language was wholly absent.

The host college, however, expressed some disappointment that more reviewers from College B were not able to attend the event. It was felt that this would have allowed for a broader sharing of experiences in one of the curriculum areas. This too was noted by an individual in the peer review team.

> *"I feel badly that …[I was the only representative of our college], that we didn't as a college offer as much to the host college as we could have, as there were colleagues from here who would have been quite effective but there were practical reasons that meant this wasn't possible. That is not the case with the one [next peer review] coming up, we've learnt from it as a positive experience and it's now the opposite - a case of trying to restrict numbers rather that increase numbers [of peer reviewers]."*

It was identified that having at least two peer reviewers per theme (*e.g.* curriculum area or SAR) would be an optimum number. A growing interest in peer review was additionally noted during the first event, with reviewers coming into contact with members of teaching staff keen to visit the other colleges and engage with their peers.

6.3 THE PEER REVIEW OF COLLEGE B

6.3.1 FOCUS OF REVIEW
According to the briefing document (College B, 2006), the college asked the team to address the following questions:

- How accurate is the judgment of the college in our Self Assessment Review (SAR)?
- How do you assess our capacity to improve?
- What needs to be done to make this process more effective and more consistent across the college so that all areas are able to achieve a status of good or better?

The peer review was carried out by four colleagues from College A and three colleagues from College C (*i.e.* seven peer reviewers in total): three individuals reviewed general college performance, with a further two pairs each looking at the nominated curriculum areas of Hair, Beauty and Leisure Industries and Engineering. The review last two days, with verbal feedback being provided at the end of the second day.

The team focusing on general college performance made use of key college procedures and documents, including:

- The SAR
- The Annual Course Review process
- Monthly Faculty reports
- Course programme meetings
- The Post Inspection Action Plan (PIAP).

This team met with representatives from senior and curriculum management, and from divisions with responsibility for the delivery of teacher training and the quality assurance of teaching and learning. During the briefing session, the nominee specifically asked the peer reviewers to consider the following points:

- Is the SAR owned within the college?
- Is the process of feeding annual course reviews into the SAR working?
- Are the actions in the PIAP sensible?

Further guidance from the host college for the peer review was as follows:

> *"The focus of the general college performance peer review/self-regulation team, based on the starting point of the SAR, should be on the effectiveness of current practices, how improvement strategies introduced since the last Ofsted inspection are operating and managed, and the extent to which improvement is realised in practice. The principal consideration should be in terms of how quality improvement strategies are managed and realised. This will involve discussion with all levels of managers across the organisation, course leaders, and groups of*

teachers. The team could helpfully make judgment as to the likely outcomes of the processes in place in terms of corporate quality improvement. Identification of strengths and areas for development would be a positive and helpful outcome."

"The focus of the curriculum area teams should be on the analysis of progress made since the last inspection from a starting point of the PIAP. Recent performance outturn data needs to be considered as part of this process as well as classroom observation outcomes. Consultation will include individual lecturers, course teams and curriculum management teams. The outcome will be a judgment as to the efficacy of the current SAR grade for the curriculum area(s). Identification of strengths and areas for development additional to those identified in the SAR would be a positive and helpful outcome."

(College B, 2006)

To facilitate the review of one of the curriculum areas, classroom observations were undertaken as agreed with the Head of School. The other curriculum area had recently undergone an extensive programme of classroom observations as part of the quality improvement measures at that college. Therefore, further classroom observations were not held during the peer review but peer reviewers of this curriculum area were present at the feedback session on the above mentioned programme to the Director of Faculty and Head of School. Curriculum area peer reviewers met with senior and middle management, teaching staff and learning support assistants. A small number of students were also informally interviewed, although there was no organised student or staff focus groups as held during the peer review at College A.

"The team met with the nominee the evening before the review started for an informal briefing and to circulate the necessary documents. This allowed time for discussion and preparation amongst the team prior to the review activities. Greater flexibility was built into the schedule, to allow peer reviewers the time to follow up avenues of interest and to provide them with the freedom to explore the college, speaking to students and staff at will."

6.3.2 FEEDBACK BY PARTICIPANTS

The new structure to the peer review was welcomed by the team and deemed to be an improvement on the previous peer review. For example:

"At this college, from my point of view it was extraordinary having the chance to go where I wanted to. I didn't think I was going to like the peer review as much here because I was looking at [XXX] but in the end I was able to look at what interested me. I ended up parachuting into other meetings and asking left field questions, getting at the points I was most interested in. This was a tremendous privilege."

- Peer Reviewer

"I was pleased to have the time on the first evening to meet everyone in the peer review team, to have the chance to get to know them, and to have the format [for the peer review] and information from the nominee."

- Peer Reviewer

"The model was approached differently at this college. It was better as it allowed us more time for feedback and for closure. As a result there was

more depth to the feedback given to the curriculum areas because enough time was allowed for this in the programme."
                                                                            - Peer Reviewer

Despite this, there were still feelings that allowing for even more reflective time would have been beneficial:

"The schedule was very busy and it perhaps would have been good to have had more time built in for the team to get together to discuss feedback, to formalise it and to compare notes, on both days. As it was, we were rushed to prepare the written feedback on the last day."
                                                                            - Peer Reviewer

Participants were again struck by the transparency the process engendered for both sides involved (*i.e.* peer reviewers and hosts), the validity, value and robustness of the process and the high level of professional commitment shown:

"The college being reviewed was committed to it [peer review]. Everyone co-operated and took part in the spirit of peer review. Also, we were accepted as peers. Senior management were committed to peer review as a tool for quality improvement."
                                                                            - Peer Reviewer

"[Peer review] is very much about professionalism, that's the word that summarises [it]. It's an utterly professional activity. It is a seriously, starkly revealing exercise, done in the nicest possible way. People try to be genuinely nice to each other, but not avoiding critical statements. And also having some empathy and some ownership of what they're saying, and again it goes back to that original distinction. It isn't just an assessment of what the organisation is like, and then you go away again and you carry on with your life. We're making some bonds now that will sustain in terms of really empathic kind of statements you can make to people."
                                                                            - Nominee

"Inspection is different. With inspection you try to present things far more in a positive light whereas this was totally honest. When I briefed my staff before the review one of my staff said 'what if I give the wrong answer' and I said 'there isn't a wrong answer'. I made it absolutely clear to them that I wasn't expecting them to sell our area in a positive slant, that I was expecting them to tell the truth, to be honest."
                                                                            - Manager of curriculum area under review

Indeed, the principal commented:

"[I thought the peer review went] generally well. I do respect those colleagues involved, they had a great deal of expertise. It's a snap shot in time – they saw bits of the college over a 14 hour period. If you get one really big idea like a professional teaching community it's worth it. If that's going to change how we think about supporting staff development and other things then just that one idea is worth the investment. It's really important that my colleagues hear the need for us to change not only from me but is corroborated by others externally – that's important to me too."

Professional learning and the sharing of good practice, on a personal and organisational level continued to be a feature of the project with this peer review:

> *"It was the first review I had done so it was a new experience going into another college in the capacity of peer reviewer. It was a bit daunting but I learnt from the process. I learnt about what others are doing and brought some of this back to my college, for example how they treat data [i.e. curriculum adjusted benchmark data]. Also, giving back something to those we were reviewing was rewarding, for example the discussion about the software we use [regarding data capture/analysis]. The fact that everyone made us feel welcome and they were very open was good. There was no sense keeping things under wraps."*

Invitations had been made to the two reviewed curriculum areas to visit the other participating colleges and there were plans to take up this offer. Senior management in both curriculum areas commented that what they found particularly helpful about the process was the suggested need to consider a farsighted approach that would consolidate their strengths. They felt enthused by the process and justified in their planned approach to continue to realise improvements.

6.3.3   UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES AND LESSONS LEARNT

There were five key central messages arising from this peer review: greater scope to speak with students and lecturers, the lack of a learner-led aspect in the process, the need to present feedback in a less structured manner, the benefits of engaging across the sector and the value of concepts such as internal peer review and a professional teaching community.

It was felt that the opportunity to speak with more lecturers and students in one of the curriculum areas would have been beneficial. No organised focus groups seem to have been planned, with peer reviewers subsequently having to rely on a tour of the department and staff rooms to speak to staff or students which was not wholly effective.

The principal identified the need for a learner-led aspect in future peer reviews, rightly pointing out that this had been lacking so far in the project:

> *"The one real aspect that peer review is missing is the learner aspect. There are two elements [needed]: one, a learner coming in with the peer review team to give the perspective of the learner in peer review and two, the learner's voice (i.e. learner representation), to share good practice, [for example] how do we do course reps here compared to the other colleges? I've asked to see if we can do this at the next peer review. I think that this will make it much more rounded and they will get something out of it too, to learn from each other about how they do their own representation in other colleges, how the relationship of student unions and learner panels work. If you look at the FE white paper, learner panels are the future."*

There were issues with the way in which feedback was structured for this review. It had been designed to report on 'strengths', 'areas for development' and 'opportunities to build on strengths'. It therefore encouraged the reporting of feedback in a more inspectorial manner which was not welcomed by several participants, for example:

"At this college I didn't like the feedback paperwork. I didn't want anything to do with it. Identifying strengths / areas of weaknesses wasn't our brief. It was too structured and meant we had to present our feedback as 'judgements'."   - Peer Reviewer

"I felt very uncomfortable in how [the feedback] was given. The format had been changed from that at the first peer review so that we were reporting on 'strengths' and 'areas for development'. This format was more like that used for an Ofsted inspection and instead I wanted to approach this feedback in a non-threatening way. At the first peer review we said, 'these are our findings, our perceptions, you follow these up as you wish'. It was more based on offering constructive criticism than making judgements. If it becomes too much like an Ofsted inspection then you have to be confident of your evidence base. I tried to couch the feedback as being more perceptive based and that this was giving them the opportunity to explore further, that it wasn't meant to be threatening."
   - Peer Reviewer

It appeared that there was some slight conflict within the team as to the approach of the review. For example, one peer reviewer commented:

"We went in with an agenda to not have an agenda and by that I meant we intended to survey and critique but without being judgemental."

This demonstrates the ethos of peer review that had been expressed at the Preparation Event and expounded during the first review. Yet it was noted that not all reviewers at the subsequent peer review had attended the Preparation Event and this showed through their use of language, with terms such as 'strengths' and 'weaknesses' and the tendency to present findings as being more judgement-based than observational points. This clearly confirmed the value of peer reviewers having an awareness of what the project was trying to achieve, either through attendance at the Preparation Event or otherwise through a knowledge and understanding of its protocols.

Other learning points about the delivery of feedback concern the way in which it was received by the host college. For example, in this instance, the principal was present throughout and it was deemed that this enhanced the validation brought to the process, adding 'credence' and 'weight' to the proceedings. Although the presence of senior management overall was valued, it was seen by one individual to have perhaps hindered the dialogue between the peer review teams and the curriculum managers:

"There wasn't an equal playing field. The principal was there, as well as senior managers, and it wasn't a climate in which the curriculum managers … could discuss or disagree with our points. I would have liked the opportunity to discuss our feedback with them beforehand, to be able to persuade them to take on board our comments as constructive feedback."

Despite these 'teething problems', it was saliently identified by one of the peer reviewers that the true value and richness of the feedback should really be measured be the ensuing professional dialogue that a written document cannot provide.

Another key learning point identified by one of the nominees, was just how powerful a tool peer review could be and how effectively it was already enabling the sharing of experiences and good practice across the participating colleges:

"[Another outcome has been the realisation of] how deficient in the sector we've been in not really engaging colleagues. Since incorporation we've been forced more into working in more localised ways in the college. You don't get out and about as much as you should. And I don't mean just going to conferences. [by visiting other colleges through peer review you are] finding out things for yourself, learning things for yourself. From my point of view, it's such a wonderful two-way process. Everybody that has participated in the event has got something for themselves, as a person and as an organisation."

This sentiment was echoed by other colleagues independently, for example:

"When you critically evaluate the practice of others it makes you reflect on your own practice. So having exposure to practices in the sector means you think about how you do things. It's very easy to become blinkered, without new people coming into an organisation you can find that things start to stagnate. Successful practice at another college can help you to persuade your colleagues to change their practices. So really, what works well is bringing back new ideas and benchmarking procedures. Everyone needs to up-skill as the needs of our learners change. Certainly in a vocational sector such as ours industrial up-skilling and having up-to-date skills are very important. You don't get that from conferences. When you visit another organisation it's refreshing because you can talk to practitioners and learners and get a real feel for how the organisation works. As a result it is the best staff development I've had."

"For me, the process has been a learning experience and has been entirely developmental. It's the first time there has been anything like this. I see it as being an extension of the self assessment process. What I will take back from it is the opportunity to improve our self assessment."

One of the most important learning points for the host organisation was the idea of a professional teaching community and the concept of internal peer review, the latter idea also being adopted by one of those colleges undertaking the review, as a consequence of the event generating this discussion. For example, one of the principals and nominees commented:

"One of the things that I have already taken away, is the notion of creating a professional teaching community and that perhaps the college would be helped by having an internal system of peer review – for example a programme area in Foundation Studies linking up with a programme area in Construction. That is something I have put in the institutional review. Both of those things have already been put into our thinking, so there is learning there that is already going into that document, and that's a key document for us … creating that professional teaching community [is something] … I see ... as part of our strategic challenge for the future … It's also about having shared values … All staff in the college need to openly share our values and work towards them. We absolutely need to spread good practice … We need colleagues who proactively seek change ... We need to spread that enthusiasm about change with other areas. That can't be top down, it's got to come from within schools. That's why I think internal peer review could work."

"I love the idea of internal peer review, it's … so brilliant because what they're going to get out of it is all the good stuff … and they'll be able to see [this] directly first hand. And they'll also be able to make some critical statements from a different perspective .... That would be fantastic internally in the organisation. That just needs to be managed in a particular way. But that'll be really an interesting outcome."

This demonstrates how effectively the outcome of peer review is able feed into key documents that set out important strategic changes within an organisation.

6.4   THE PEER REVIEW OF COLLEGE C

6.4.1   FOCUS OF REVIEW

The review briefing (College C, 2006) indicated that in its recent Ofsted inspection, the college had been judged as overall 'outstanding'. The draft inspection report provided comprehensive information about the College's strengths and areas for improvement. Key issues identified in the PIAP were improving retention for 16-18 year old learners, specifically at Levels 1 and 3, personalised learning (*e.g.* planning individual learning outcomes, target setting, tutorial curriculum, support) and Work Based Learning (WBL). The peer review team were invited to explore these themes and to offer any insight that would assist with planning quality improvement strategies for their next stage of development. Therefore, the peer review at College C differed from the earlier two reviews as it was based upon three cross-college themes, rather than one cross-college theme, from the starting point of the SAR, and two curriculum areas. A further development was the introduction of a student representative (*i.e.* the Student Union President from one of the other colleges) to the peer review team, to capture more effectively the learner voice and perspective in the process. The peer review team included three colleagues from College A and four colleagues from College B, so that two pairs respectively focused on WBL and ILPs and three individuals worked on retention. The team met with the host college nominee the evening before the review began, a successful change to the scheduling that had been identified during the previous peer review.

The peer review team was asked to address specifically the following questions:

- How effective are the College's existing strategies to improve retention for 16-18 year old learners? What else could the College consider?
- How could the planning of individual learning be improved across the College?
- What improvements have been made in WBL? What else could the college do to improve this provision?

In WBL, reviewers were asked to consider:

- Are the objectives in the action plan appropriate and how effectively are they being addressed?
- What factors hinder rather than assist improvement?
- Is the level of improvement sufficient and at the right pace?
- What else should be considered to improve work based learning?

In examining the Retention of 16-18 year old learners, reviewers were asked to consider:

- What are the main reasons for drop-out?

- What impact have the various strategies had on improving retention?
- Are planned strategies appropriate?
- What factors hinder rather than assist improvement?
- Could a more sociable culture at the College have an positive impact on retention? How best could the College introduce social activities/spaces to enhance the learning?

In examining the planning of individual learning, reviewers were asked to consider:

- Where in the College is target-setting most successful and why?
- Why do some tutors find target-setting a difficult process?
- How do Skills for Life individual learning plans inform the planning process for teachers? What is the relationship between the two? How do recommendations filter through?

<div align="right">(College C, 2006)</div>

Working in pairs/threes, the peer review team discussed these issues in detail with learners, teachers, managers and Learner Services colleagues. Although formal classroom observations had not been built into the programme, the opportunity to drop into lessons to test out themes was made available.

6.4.2   FEEDBACK BY PARTICIPANTS

The verbal feedback from the peer review team was thought to be fair and critical. Some individuals in the peer review team commented that the way in which it was delivered had been improved on from the previous event:

> *"I think that the style of reportage at College C was better than at College B as there was no level of higher or lower importance placed on each observation fed back."*

Other improvements were deemed to be the introduction of a learner representative and sustaining the previous changes to the programme whereby the peer review team met and were introduced to the host college nominee the evening before the review. The learner representative indicated importantly that they had been made to feel a part of the peer review team, they would like to participate again in future and believed that the sharing of good practice prompted by the project would ultimately be of benefit to students. Overall, issues that peer reviewers felt worked particularly well with the review continued to be elements such as openness and honesty and the make-up of a highly professional team who brought a range of skills and experiences to the process:

> *"For College C, I think that they got a very honest, professional consultation. I think that had there not been people [in the peer review team] who understood the areas as well as they did then the feedback wouldn't have been so quick and effective. As we knew what themes were going to come up we were able to put the right people in place [in the team]."*

> *"We were fairly clear as a team about what we wanted to do. The level of analysis was really sound. Working with other colleagues was again beneficial and the introduction of a learner was inspired. There was a high level of professionalism in terms of everyone involved: the peer reviewers, those we spoke to in the host college (because of their openness and honesty) and the managers at College C."*

Having people in the team with the relevant skills was seen to be crucial to the success of the process. Several participants in the team also noted the added value that working with colleagues from another organisation brought to the process and to their own professional development:

> *"I enjoyed working with XXX [a colleague from another organisation], even though I didn't know this person before the peer review event. Working with a colleague like this meant we were able to bounce ideas off one another and move to another plane. So this was beneficial. It enabled me to have a professional conversation that we so often don't give ourselves the time to do. This means that we are able to come up with a solution that is more effective."*

The provision of student focus groups was also a welcome return from the schedule delivered at College A, although there were a few student attendance issues (Section 6.4.3). The change of focus, from curriculum areas, to a review based on cross-college issues was also thought to have been a successful adaptation of the review framework:

> *"I think working on cross-college themes worked well. It was broad enough but focussed enough to understand what was going on."*

One individual commented that adaptability was again an important factor in peer review, specifically the ability to 'circumvent' any agenda put in place by the host college, although this was thought to result from the desire for 'an objective view of what colleagues in the college were doing or not doing'. The desire to manage a peer review event was an issue identified elsewhere by one nominee, in the sense that they wanted the programme and organised activities to run smoothly and to ensure that the planned schedule facilitated the points the peer reviewers were examining during the process.

6.4.3   UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES AND LESSONS LEARNT

Despite the recognition that student focus groups were a good idea, there were some issues with speaking to sufficient numbers of students:

> *"There were some difficulties in some aspects of the programme – getting access to the students. The teaching sessions that had been arranged weren't appropriate for me to talk to students. I was able to manage this though as I found some learners to speak to. It wasn't the best time of year to have the peer review [i.e. end of academic year]. This didn't make the outcomes any less valuable, it just made it harder for us doing the review."*

Others also identified that future peer review events should not necessarily be carried out at the end of the academic year. Some also felt that the programme was slightly too loose and that they would have welcomed easier access to points of contact, either to assist them in keeping to the scheduled activities or to approach when planned activities needed to be amended:

> *"During the actual day it was useful having a clear agenda to work from, but again because we were all split up individually it would have been useful, [to have had] perhaps a member of the host college to be able to meet up periodically [with] to check things were running smoothly, because I didn't feel that I had a place to go necessarily to chase up things that weren't perhaps appropriate [such as a poor turn out for the student focus groups]."*

During the verbal feedback session, there was some interruption to the process by individuals from the host college entering or leaving the meeting. This was seen by some individuals in the peer review team to 'devalue' the sense of validity given to the feedback. It is something that the nominee expressed as a matter to resolve in any future events, that a priority would be greater preparation of senior managers about the value of the process and what the feedback would entail. Having said this, there were individuals from the host college who were highly appreciative of the feedback, one commenting that it was more 'acute and toe-curling than Ofsted'.

Another learning point to come out of the review concerns developing the capacity for learner involvement in future peer reviews:

> *"On reflection, I would have engaged the [host college] Student Union more in the process so that they were able to get more out of it. Including a student in the team was a good way of strengthening and increasing the capacity of the learner voice."*

The creation of a network of professional peers, who could offer advice and guidance in the future was identified by more than one individual, for example:

> *"I feel I could pick up the phone and ask [name] a question, I feel I could pick up the phone and ask [name] a question. Same with [name], I think one of the big benefits of peer review is it gives you that network of people to talk to. I was asking the staff at College A about their teaching and learning strategy, that's something I'm involved in. I was asked about our ILT strategies. So it was almost as if to say, well this is our focus for these 36 hours, but beyond that, I've now got somebody I can pick the phone up to or somebody I could send an e-mail to, and it extends that kind of reference network … And that's what it's got to be. The sharing of good practice is a very efficient way of using the precious commodity of time."*

Some reviewers identified that they would have liked greater dialogue between all individuals of the peer review team (*i.e.* not only the nominees) and the host college prior to the review. It was felt that this may have allowed for the chance to impact positively on the design of the scheduled activities. One individual recognised that too much prior contact, including the provision of key documents such as the SAR, could result in peer reviewers forming judgements before the review that could subsequently bias their perceptions at the host college. Both viewpoints are valid. It is likely to be the case that there is a fine balance in ensuring that sufficient pre-review dialogue is made available to all without adversely affecting the freshness of the critical approach that is deemed to be of such value with the process.

For one peer reviewer, there was specific good practice to take back to their college around the use of learning resources:

> *"One of the things that struck me at College C was the environment in Construction. They were making excellent use of that environment, in the use of learning resources developed by an internal team, for example posters. There was a real sense of ownership and belonging. In my experience, this is unusual in that context."*

Lastly, for several members of the peer review team, there was the realisation that the overall 'outstanding' grade of an Ofsted inspection was achievable and one of the key mechanisms in realising this was strong management of the inspection process.

6.5 EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

Overall, drawing upon the unexpected positive outcomes and lessons learnt from each peer review, it is possible to summarise some examples of good practice prompted by the project. These include:

- The provision of peer review 'awareness preparation' (*i.e.* the Preparation Event) for those who are to be involved in peer review
- Ongoing support offered to and by each college in turn through professional dialogue. Some of this has since culminated in colleagues of similar core areas (*e.g.* WBL) visiting peers in another college within the partnership to share ideas and experience
- The value of undertaking classroom observations during peer review with a colleague from the host college. This enabled a forum for discussion which provided insight into the judgement-forming processes of the college in relation to the quality of teaching and learning and facilitated the *verification* of such judgements as envisaged within peer review
- Organised focus groups with teaching staff and students. Those observed demonstrated the highly comprehensive questioning of peer reviewers and their effectiveness in allowing the peer review to identify issues at 'grass roots' level. When sufficient numbers of participants were present, they were a more effective method of surveying individuals than tours of classrooms or staff rooms
- The inclusion of a learner representative is an effective and justified means of empowering the learner voice in the self-regulation process
- Presenting verbal and written feedback based upon an observational style of reporting in which each point is presented with no order of priority.
- Written feedback that is available within four weeks of the review (*e.g.* as with College B).

7. DISSEMINATING AND REFLECTING UPON PEER REVIEW

Perhaps most telling is the fact that when peer reviewers were asked to describe their experience of the project in one word, the response was unanimously positive. They used adjectives such as: 'invigorating', 'intense', 'fun', 'interesting', 'exciting', 'self-developmental', 'a positive challenge', 'validating', 'immensely positive', 'enlightening', 'fabulous', 'revitalising', 'brilliant', 'refreshing', 'energising', 'invaluable', 'worthwhile', 'developmental', 'enjoyable', 'reflective', 'encouraging' and 'motivating'. This was echoed by those in the host colleges, both nominees and individuals from reviewed areas (*e.g.* see Appendix 3). This section builds upon the narrative of how peer review unfolded in each of the colleges in which it was trialled by discussing how else the project was shaped, through its dissemination at the L4L festival in June 2006 (*i.e.* between the second and third peer reviews) and through a consideration of participants' reflections on their journey so far and into the future of the project.

7.1 SPREADING THE WORD: THE L4L FESTIVAL

One of the sessions during the L4L Festival provided an interim update on the peer review project. This was presented to L4L member colleges and their partner colleges who were present. A brief introduction was given by the project lead nominee and representatives from host colleges and peer review teams acted as panels to which attendees could direct questions, having formulated them through group discussion. A brief research-based summary was given at the end of the presentation. The session was also evaluated through similar event evaluation forms used at the Preparation

Event (Section 5.3). A total of 20 attendees completed these forms at the start and end of the session, although once again the total number of people present far exceeded this. It should be stressed that attendants were present from all League for Learning colleges participating in the various self-regulation projects reported in Sections 1 and 2.

Based on responses to the evaluation forms, the session demonstrated an increase in confidence amongst those respondents with regards to explaining the national context for self-regulation, identifying what the peer review process involves and giving and receiving constructive feedback with regard to peer review (Table 2, Figure 2).

Statement	% agreeing or strongly agreeing	
	START	END
'I can identify what the peer review process involves'	30	85
'I can give and receive constructive feedback with regard to peer review'	25	50
'I can explain the national context for self-regulation'	20	55

Table 2: Success of the session on peer review at the L4L Festival, evidenced by the increase in percentages of those participants who responded positively to the evaluative statements.

Respondents also made the following comments in support of peer review:

> "My experience of process was that it was very thorough and in some ways more rigorous than Ofsted. Feedback was constructive and supportive."

> "[This was] very useful. Peer review is the way forward."

> "An important, welcomed process. Needs to keep it rigorous and keep its credibility."

> "This is long overdue and we must not lose the initiative or momentum."

The lead nominee commented positively on the session, perceiving it to have been well-received:

> "That was the first time that we'd really gone public with this, and it was fairly obvious that there was a lot of energy being created by it. I think that in itself moved the whole concept forward. I already felt that a larger body of people than had currently participated in it now sort of saw that this is a really interesting activity professionally."

I can identify what the peer review process involves

I can give and receieve constructive feedback with regard to peer review

I can explain the national context for peer review

N.B. 1= Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Slightly Disagree, 4 = Slightly Agree, 5 = Agree, 6 = Strongly Agree.
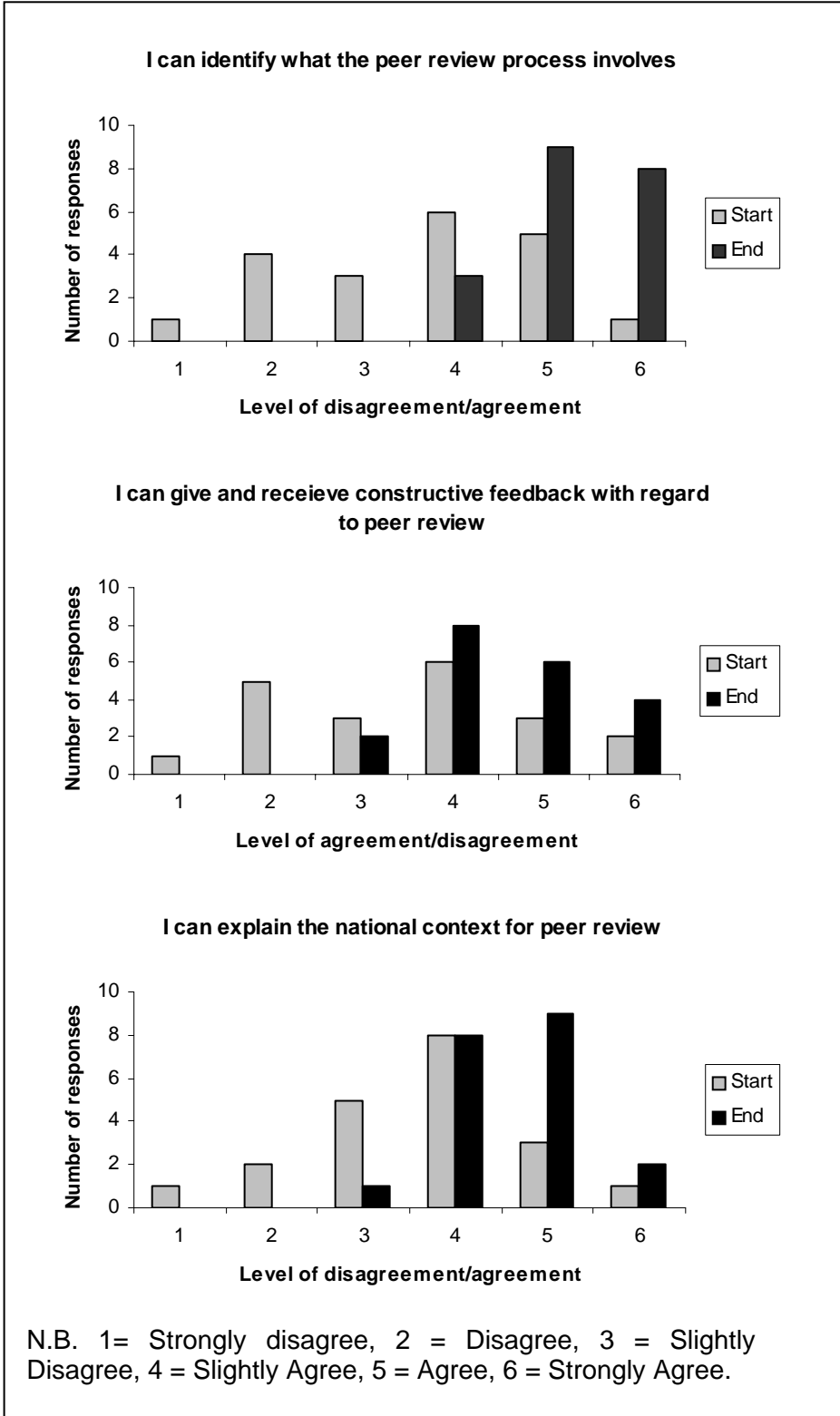
Figure 2: Bar charts demonstrating the distance travelled by participants as a result of the L4L Festival.

Following the event, attendees at the session were also surveyed. A total of 13 replied who reported that the impression of peer review that they had taken away with them was as follows:

> *"That the peer review could provide valuable feedback with regards to standard of teaching and learning and identifying areas for improvement as well as mentoring."*

> *"The importance of Peer Review for sharing and disseminating good practice."*

> *"The opportunity to discuss the project with people who had been through the process was very useful."*

> *"We need to assure that lecturers feel they are benefiting from the process - that it's not just one more hoop to jump through."*

> *"The message that was given from managers was fairly positive, however, the lecturers that I spoke to (i.e. people on the ground) said that they had had quite a negative experience. There were three separate people from different colleges all of whom said that they, and their teams, viewed the experience as something similar to Ofsted, with minimal benefit/impact to their practice. In building up to having the review they said that staff were panicking in a similar way to being inspected. This doesn't make sense if the peer review is supposed to be supportive and helpful."*

It is not clear which three separate colleges are being referred to in this comment. Teaching staff in the host colleges were approached during the course of the research evaluation but none fed back the sentiments expressed above. Overwhelmingly, comments made to the researcher have not supported the negative sentiments expressed above. Some of the self-regulation exercises being carried out in other colleges are known to be more akin to Ofsted inspection and it is possible that the negative impression referred to above relates to these rather than those encompassed in the project under evaluation here.

In any case, all respondents indicated they would welcome participation in future peer review exercises. Consensus was that there is a future for the project. A selection of reasons for this is as follows:

> *"More than ever, standards need to be improved and this seems the best way to go."*

> *"Sometimes visits to other colleges only benefit one of the colleges involved because the other college is streets ahead. This seems to be a project where good college can share what they do particularly well and all parties should benefit."*

7.2 A REFLECTIVE JOURNEY: PEER REVIEW NOW AND IN THE NEXT STAGE

Participants who had been involved in the project at various stages or throughout its delivery offered an interesting insight into their experiences of the 'journey' of peer review and how they thought it would be best developed from here. Summarising their comments results in the following issues for consideration.

1. Peer review within this project did not develop into an inspectorial approach because the nature of the partnerships between colleges and the consistency of leadership allowed for a high level of trust to develop:

> *"To begin with I was worried about 'peer review' genuinely being 'peer review'. Even though we were agreed on our values and intentions, I was concerned that we may behave like Ofsted inspectors. Partnerships can become rigid but because there has been trust between the colleges and some consistency in the teams / team leaders the climate of openness has grown. So the bond [within the team] is important. There are so many pressing priorities in FE. We have put peer review as one of the top priorities and we have the backing from our principals. There is a trust there that means we can change things if we need to … a fluidness … it's not rigid."*

> *"I thought peer review would be more like inspection but it has gone further than that. I am glad that we resisted producing inspection-type paperwork. We encouraged the peer review process to change. We avoided the desire to make it consistent and this has led to interesting discussion and a dynamic approach."*

Indeed, the awareness amongst peer reviewers not to approach the project as 'inspectors' was noted from the start of the project:

> *"We avoided the desire to make it consistent and this has led to interesting discussion and a dynamic approach."*

The outcome of peer review, when compared with inspection, is that overall it allows for a more comprehensive quality improvement strategy because it addresses how colleges can build on their strengths:

> *"Yesterday with another colleague I came up with the four 'R's of peer review: Risk, Rigour, Revalue and Revitalising. [By revalue I mean] … verifying your strengths. We don't do this enough because with inspection there is a tendency to focus on devaluing, on addressing at weaknesses. Critical statements don't just have to be about weaknesses though, they can cover your strengths too."*

2. It is important to consider how far down an organisation 'peer review' benefits its staff at the time the event is happening. It is clear that peers at managerial level have benefited from the process but how fully this has been felt at the level of teaching staff, is yet to be identified. For example:

> *"I am on board now as much I was on board in the beginning. The confidence that it can work has increased. My personal confidence in being a peer reviewer has definitely increased. I still think that the spirit of sustaining peer review could be an issue. There is the potential paradox between inspection and peer review and I think we need to be clear about what we are trying to do with peer review [i.e. the message is not yet clear]. I think we talk about achieving the second [peer review] but our actions demonstrate the first [i.e. inspection] – we can't help ourselves. Structuring it so that we have boxes [for feedback] on strengths and areas of weakness, doing observations … peer review is not about this, it's about a teacher from performance and dance in one college going to a teacher from performance and dance in another*

college, or a maths teacher visiting another maths teacher and having a discussion about their teaching. Only then would you know if the other person's teaching was effective… At the Preparation Event, peers were put in the same room – the result was quality managers giddy with excitement at the chance for discourse. Peer review should be like – peers talking to one another."

It is important to qualify this statement by making the observation that one outcome of peer review is that members of teaching staff, for example, will visit their 'peers' in other colleges within the partnership to share ideas, experiences and good practice. This would suggest that 'peer review' will work at all levels of an organisation if such development opportunities continue to be taken up in the future.

3. Individuals have identified that they and others have developed professionally as a result of their involvement in the project and that the project could allow for a significant impact in the sector through the sharing of good practice:

"At the risk of being clichéd I would have to say the journey for me has been from unconsciously capable to consciously capable. By that I mean that I didn't know before if I would be able to feed back anything useful. However, I think that the knowledge, expertise and experience of those involved in the peer review is really important. It has facilitated the process and helped us to articulate it. I certainly want to do more peer review."

"I think one thing that I'll take out of [my involvement in this project] is the evolving role of me as a professional in education … that when I come to attend a future interview, and I can say I was involved in a peer review, then I think people on the other side of the table are going to go 'This is somebody who's had a range of experiences. This is somebody who is able… who isn't afraid to go and talk to a group of students from a completely different kind of social reference group, completely different background, completely different college.'"

"I did expect that people would grow [as individuals] as a result of it. I think I saw that certainly in two colleagues. Part of the thing around peer review will be that you get champions of peer review within institutions who will be able to drive the whole process elsewhere. So for those two colleagues, you could send them to another college somewhere else tomorrow and get them to set up a peer review system there and I guarantee that they would do it really well. You could see that in the way that they were feeding back and they really care about students. So there are those sorts of things about focus on learning, focus on standards, focus on quality improvement that I think will come out [of peer review]."

"So I think what it [peer review] enables me to do as an employer at the college is to look very much at the wider issues relating to qualities, so recognising that teaching and learning is one component of quality, but it could actually break down the students' experience. There's a lot of facets there which need to be examined, that need to be looked at. And we need to break those facets down into sub-sectors, and almost end up with this enormous great quality diagram of significant stages in learner entry, and different stages of learner exit, all things that exist in between and all the factors that inter-relate to those. And you end up with an

exceptionally complex model… It's taking all the aspects of it, and recognition that teaching and learning is one component."

"All of it is a huge learning curve. It's really exciting. It is one of the most exciting things I have been involved with for a few years, not only for my personal development but for the developments it offers in the sector. The honesty is so refreshing, it's not false or manipulated. People share in the process. With any quality improvement initiative, if there is no honesty from the beginning then there is no chance for improvement. Here we have the commitment of people working together. It is interesting to find that we are all struggling with similar things, such as ILPs. To be able to work together like this will produce incredibly positive outcomes. I think my emphasis now would be on the sharing of good practice and the opportunities that arise for development which will grow and increase over time."

4. There is an interesting debate concerning the composition of future peer review teams regarding the amount of experience within the team:

"I think there has to be a balance within the team to be really successful. I wouldn't necessarily say people need to be experienced in the peer review process, but they do need to be experienced in critical feedback, critical analysis of the information and discussion."

"By the second peer review I could feel I was being sucked in. There is something to be said for innocency. I think peer review has a limited life cycle. By the second review I was more confident, more blasé and more likely to be inspectorial and so less useful as a peer reviewer. I had to monitor this [behaviour myself]."

Conversely, some might argue that with experience comes the confidence not to act like inspectors. In either case, there is value in continually introducing new people to each peer review team who are able to offer a fresh perspective. At the same time, effective management and drive, offered by experienced peer reviewers should be an important component of each team:

"There is a forceful context in that we have a good professional working relationship within the group of people already established. Establishing those contacts means you have people willing to help you which makes constancy of continuance possible."

8. CONCLUSIONS

8.1 INTRODUCTION
This project developed largely within the ethos and framework of protocols in which it was envisaged (Section 5.2), although the amount of divergence from an inspectorial approach that it took was something of a welcome surprise to many. Indeed, it was deemed to feel nothing like inspection. Hopes expressed by the principals that it would lead to a 'richer texture in discussions', the sharing of good practice and the promotion of peer review within the organisations have all been realised. The project has been characterised by the sharing of knowledge, experience and positive solutions to common problems amongst the colleges involved, with the outcome that many in the peer review teams have reported a rich professional dialogue that is ongoing.

Furthermore, sharing the experience of the initial peer reviews, a request made at the Preparation Event (Section 5.3), was realised at the L4L Festival (Section 7.1).

The process observed has been rigorous, robust, critical and of value to individuals in the host colleges and peer review teams. Peer reviewers repeatedly commented to the researcher that disguise or complacency in the feedback was pointless, it had to be critical to be credible and to make the process worthwhile. In the words of one participant, peer review is 'professionally credible … places quality improvement in the centre of the context for the development of professional culture and ... has the capacity to inspire.'

Working through the process allowed peer reviewers to develop an effective style of recording activities and presenting feedback. In contrast to the format originally envisaged (Section 5.3.4), that of 'prioritising areas for improvement' which would have brought different levels of importance to a judgement-based report, feedback was found to be best received when given as observations of areas for further consideration.

Original concerns that it would be too comfortable (Section 5.4.2), involving the selection of areas for review for unjustifiable reasons, have been unfounded. Additionally, the concern that peer review would not involve true 'peers' (*i.e.* weighted towards senior management level) can be answered by the point that inter-college visits, involving curriculum management and teaching teams, have been an outcome of the process; teachers will be able to converse with other teachers in partner organisations. The process of peer review, taken in the context of subsequent development activities, has filtered down the organisations, it has not been the preserve merely of those in management positions.

It has been identified that the success of this peer review project was reliant upon a number of factors:

- Having the opportunity to chose colleges to work with in the partnership created a sense of ownership and commitment to the project
- The way in which peer review as a process is presented by the host college to its staff. Presented as a positive opportunity for professional development and quality improvement ensures it is a process that is welcomed
- The clarity of the expectations (briefing) of the host college, to ensure that what they want to get out of the process is effectively communicated and therefore more likely to be realised
- The professionalism of the peer review team (*e.g.* not only in asking the most effective questions but doing so in the right manner by teasing out information sensitively and comprehensively) and the willingness to rise to the challenge or demand of the process in each different situation
- The effective management and leadership of nominees, for example in identifying and bringing the necessary skills base to the peer review teams
- The openness and honesty of all in the host college and peer review team.
- The professional dialogue both during the peer review and afterwards
- The dedication and commitment (time and effort) of all involved
- The ability to adapt the process to meet the needs of the host college and peer review team and to learn from good practice throughout the course of the project to enable it to be developed in a way that would be beneficial to the participant organisations (*e.g.* amending the presentation format of feedback, introduction of learner representation).

8.2   MEETING THE PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

It is important to stress that the developmental nature of the project necessitates the recognition that stringently adhering to the original project aims and objectives would not necessarily have resulted in a project of benefit to all colleges involved. Allowing for an adaptive structure was one of its strengths and meant that some of the aims and objectives were more easily achievable than others. Nevertheless, it is clear overall that all objectives were met:

- Each participating college held a two day review using the SAR as the basis for the review, choosing other areas for further specific focus
- Follow-up support arising from each peer review has occurred and is expected to be on-going, therefore it is likely that the intended outcome of 'two to three days of development activities' will be achieved within the next six months. This is not necessarily going to occur only in those 'areas for improvement' as a key message that has developed from the project is the need to focus and consolidate also on 'areas of strengths'
- The sharing of good practice has been a strong feature of the project throughout.

In considering whether the aims of the project were met, it is worth examining the purpose of the Common Inspection Framework and the intention of peer review. The CIF is used as an evaluative, judgement-forming tool by inspectors when assessing five outcomes (Section 1). In presenting the focus of peer reviews, each college presented various questions or issues for consideration which could link into any of the themes of the CIF outcomes. However, these questions were not phrased in exactly the same way for peer review. They were presented to facilitate the 'verification' of the host college's judgements through 'critical analysis'. They were intended to result in observations rather than judgements. This process was clearly facilitated through 'a mature, professional dialogue for development and quality improvement'. This is evident from the concluding remarks in Section 8.3. It should be noted that no comment on the Business Excellence Model is made here as this was piloted by the other group of colleges in the project.

8.3   THE IMPACT OF THE PROJECT: OUTCOMES, LESSONS LEARNT AND GOOD PRACTICE

Various outcomes, lessons learnt and examples of good practice have been recorded and can be summarised as follows:

- Allowing two days for a peer review was sufficient, improved by bringing together the team the day, or evening, before the review. However, participants often felt that feedback was rushed or that there was insufficient time to discuss fully the findings of the peer review between the host college and the review team before the end of the event. Many participants have suggested that the review could be more easily accommodated over a period of three days. Colleges may also wish to consider whether future peer reviews take the opportunity to revisit issues raised in previous reviews
- The briefing session at the start of each peer review allowed the host college to provide background information to the review and gave the peer review team the opportunity to ask probing questions and initiate a professional discussion
- Project diaries were not completed by participants. The feedback was that these added too greatly to existing paperwork requirements (*e.g.* providing written feedback) and it was decided that these records could be supplanted by relying on data gathering during the research evaluation
- 'Record of Activity' forms and 'Evidence Example' forms were abandoned. They were deemed to be too prescriptive, too inspectorial in approach and unable to

capture effectively the observational style of reporting required by peer review here

- Working through peer review in practice allowed early uncertainty over how to overcome the issue of using inspectorial language to be resolved. Presenting feedback as 'strengths' and 'areas for improvement', for example, was less successful a format than presenting it, in no order of priority, as observations or 'issues to consider further'
- Initial suggestions were made to allow a sufficient period of time for reflection between the peer review and the delivery of feedback (Section 5.3.5). However, presenting verbal feedback immediately following a review has a currency of freshness. Written feedback allows time for reflection.
- There has been a significant impact on participants and organisations within a relatively short period of time
- Greater recognition of the learner voice, through the introduction of student representation in the final peer review was deemed to be a success by all concerned
- All participants were open and honest. This ranged from the willingness of staff in the host college to answer questions candidly to those individuals in the peer review team who were upfront about their approach to the review as 'critical friends' rather than inspectors
- Requests by the peer review team for additional paperwork or documentation, or changes to the scheduled programme were always met by each host college
- Members of teaching staff and students who the host colleges arranged to meet with the peer review team were selected as those available at that given time which would give a representative spread of those in the curriculum/cross-college areas. These individuals were not selectively chosen to present a positive message to the peer review team but to give an honest account of their experiences
- Each peer review was characterised by a wealth of professional discourse. This occurred not only between members of the host college and peer review team, who often took the opportunity to share experiences and ideas on resolving common issues faced by both, but also within the peer review team when discussing their observations during visits to the other colleges. This professional dialogue has continued beyond the peer review events.

Lastly, it was requested that the researcher provide a short statement about her experience of the project in this final report. This is available in Appendix 4.

9.   RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1   PROJECT SUSTAINABILITY

The promotion of self-regulation continues to gather momentum in the sector. Within this context, it is clear that peer review has some part to play in realising or moving towards increased self-regulation. Peer review certainly is sustainable in the short-term and possibly long-term as well, although certain decisions will have to be made to channel its development to ensure it continues to be as effective a tool as has been demonstrated here.

The project is sustainable because all participants have expressed a keen interest to continue with peer review and there is a considerable body of new interest to harness, feeding into a resource of peer reviewers. Principals are committed to the process. Indeed, one has already commented on its cost effectiveness. It is seen by many 'to be the way forward'. This support is an important foundation on which to grow the project further. It is clear that the project still has much to offer to the institutions concerned:

> *"One of the really I think outstanding spin-offs of this is the fact that we're making a lot of contact – professional contact – with colleagues, that we would not normally have had access to do. It's making contact on all levels of professional dialogue."*

Based upon the nature and volume of contact between organisations observed thus far, it is likely that these initial collaborative relationships will continue to flourish.

This project represents just one (nevertheless successful) approach to realising self-regulation through the model of peer review. It is likely to be the case that 'one size does not fit all' and that other colleges adapt the process to meet their own needs, as befits an organic and developmental project such as this. Indeed, part of the success of this peer review project came from the fact that key players allowed it to evolve and be shaped in such a way that it would have the maximum benefit to the colleges involved. In sharing such a methodology with others, there is always the danger that it could develop a character or ethos which is quite different to that in which it was originally conceived. If this scenario is indeed an outcome, then maintaining the integrity of the process may be difficult and will require careful consideration. It presents a situation that agencies such as the QIA and LSC are likely to be observing with interest. Some participants feel that responsibility for this peer review project should be left entirely with those organisations that developed it:

> *"I wouldn't like peer review to become conscripted by the other agencies, such as the QIA and LSC. I can see how they would introduce various layers with the chance that the freshness and dynamic quality of approach that we have adopted would be lost."*

> *"Within the self-regulation framework it could develop to become more focussed on outcomes and judgements, so a more structured approach. Having said that, I think that the way we approached it in the L4L has been very developmental and I would hate to see that lost. If you are approaching it in a more exciting, more developmental way then you are able to make observations, rather than judgements, which can be valuable for a college to hear, to follow up. This feedback could be lost in a more structured approach, because you wouldn't be able to present observations."*

It is at this point that the colleges in the League for Learning, who have developed these self-regulation projects, should be commended and recognised in the sector for their commitment and foresight. Particularly so because they have found the necessary resources for the project themselves without securing external funding. If this project is to develop further within their capable hands, then ensuring that peer review continues to mature in the spirit in which it was conceived and initially developed, it will be necessary to trust in the expertise and strong, effective management of those who are involved in such a process. The success of peer review is highly dependent on the people who make the process happen, on their enthusiasm, commitment, skills and expertise:

> *"If people don't raise their games to be as effective and professional as they possibly can, if we don't get people who are trained in the sense that they share an ideology about what it's supposed to do then that's where there may be a problem. It will be interesting to see how this develops…*
> *…I think that if you are going to look at somebody else's work then you need to be pretty clear in saying that you don't think that is very effective*

– you are willing to say that and to confront it. The problem is that you might get people who are not ready to operate in that kind of way."

If peer review is to have widespread currency in the sector then careful consideration may also need to be given to how the process will best fit in with other regulatory practices to ensure it does not give cause for a growing sense of bureaucracy and a burden that is under-resourced. Peer review has been about complimenting those quality assurance and improvement processes already in place but whether this situation is to continue unchanged is not clear:

"If this project is about self-regulation through peer review and imagining an eventual future without Ofsted, then the process must be about validating self-assessment. This is completely legitimate and would involve taking on the role of Ofsted with full scrutiny of evidence including lesson observation, but trying to do it better by genuinely offering advice and on-going support. [If it is just about giving] … mutual support and advice this is also legitimate, but incompatible with an aspiration to full self-regulation."

The sentiments expressed in the above commentary are perhaps issues for all in the sector to consider carefully, not necessarily in the immediate future but certainly in the long-term.

Lastly, additional 'food for thought' concerns the resourcing of capacity building the project in the future, especially if peer review becomes a more common occurrence in the college calendar:

"One thought I've had can potentially have quite an impact on the reviewers and that is time … or having sufficient time. Taking part in peer review means a heavy commitment of time … QIA have funding which I believe could be used to financially support peer review. Having said that, if good [i.e. capable] people are given more time to spend on peer review, it could prove difficult to backfill the gaps they leave [with equally capable people]. It is our experience that not all Ofsted inspectors are up-to-speed. What you need are good people who still work in the sector, with the relevant expertise. It is better to fund them [than Ofsted inspectors]. Now, I really firmly believe that working together with colleagues from other colleges is the way forward for quality improvement."

9.2   GOOD PRACTICE
A series of observations, based upon the lessons learnt in this project, have been used to suggest what merits good practice for consideration in any future peer review process that develops. These are based on the set of circumstances specific to this project and may not suit every situation in which peer review is eventually used. It is recommended that:

- All individuals being newly introduced to peer review should be made aware of the project protocols. Ownership of the process is particularly important for peer reviewers, who additionally should attend an 'awareness preparation event' similar to that detailed in Section 5.3. This could be delivered in-house or through a collective L4L event. Alternatively, or additionally, protocols could be included as a point of reference amongst the peer review documentation presented by host colleges for the benefit of peer reviewers new to the process

- Where possible, every effort should be made to provide written feedback within four weeks of the review
- A minimum of two reviewers per review area is ideal and a learner representative is highly advisable
- The opportunity for dialogue with the host college should be presented to all in the peer review team prior to a review event. It should not be restricted to the nominees alone. This was a suggestion made by several participants
- A League for Learning website should be set up with easy access to information about the different experiences of peer review/other self-regulation initiatives, which disseminates the outcomes of projects and provides a forum in which other colleges may learn from this good practice
- The learning that takes place within the next phase of the project needs to be recorded. This does not necessarily have to be burdensome. The simple format of project diaries (Appendix 1) originally suggested by the project steering group would fulfil this need. This too would encourage participants to reflect on their experiences and would facilitate the sharing of good practice. The use of project diaries feeds into the following recommendation
- Some consideration of providing impact analysis in the future life of the project is advisable. Again, this could be achieved relatively simply, the format being adapted to suit the outcome for each organisation
- Where possible, greater sharing of experiences between the two frameworks being piloted within the overarching project would be beneficial.

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GLOSSARY OF SELECTED TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

**ALI (Adult Learning Inspectorate)**
The Adult Learning Inspectorate is the inspectorate for skills, workforce development and preparation for employment and work with employers and training providers in the public and private sector.

AoC (Association of Colleges)
Created in 1996, the Association of Colleges promotes the interests of Further Education Colleges in England and Wales.

BEM (Business Excellence Model)
The Business Excellence Model is a nine box model originally developed by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM). Explained rather simplistically, self-assessment of an organisation is achieved through comparison with the model. Five of the criteria relate to 'Enablers' (what an organisation does) and four to 'Results' (what an organisation achieves). According to Saferpak (2006), 'the Model, which recognises there are many approaches to achieving sustainable excellence in all aspects of performance, is based on the premise that excellent results with respect to Performance, Customers, People and Society are achieved through Leadership driving Policy and Strategy, that is delivered through People Partnerships and Resources, and Processes'.
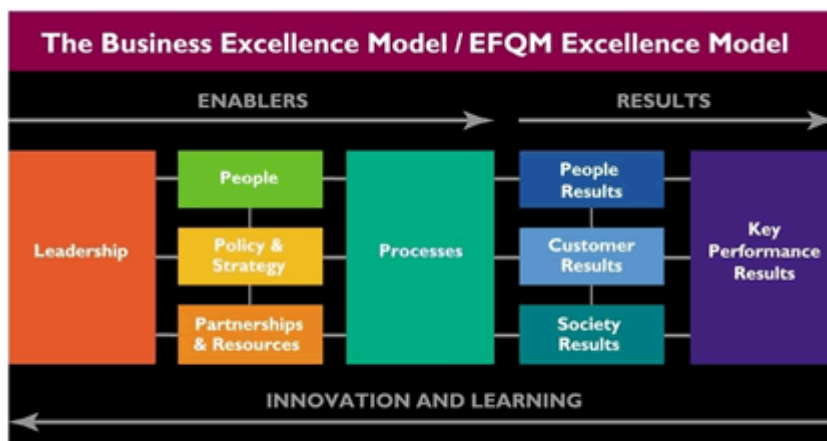
Chatham House Rule of Confidentiality,
Promotes free discussion amongst individuals by allowing them to voice 'off the record' or with the guarantee of anonymity, personal views which may or may not be shared by the organisations they represent. The Rule, which originated from the Royal Institute of International Affairs ('Chatham House'), states that, 'when a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed' (Wilkepedia, 2006).

CIF (Common Inspection Framework)
According to Ofsted (2005, p. 2), The Common Inspection Framework

> *"Meets the requirements of the Learning and Skills Act 2000. It sets out the principles applicable to the inspection of post-16 non-higher education and training carried out under Part III of the Act. Inspections are carried out by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the Adult learning Inspectorate (ALI)".*

The CIF includes the common inspection schedule, procedures to be carried out in the case that educational provision is inadequate, principles of inspection, a code of conduct for inspectors and the procedure for making complaints about inspection. Under the common inspection schedule, Ofsted inspectors must consider during their inspection of relevant educational institutions and training providers themes that include 'overall effectiveness', 'achievement and standards', 'the quality of provision', and 'leadership and management'. The common grading scale adheres to the following criteria: Grade 1 - Outstanding; Grade 2 - Good; Grade 3 - Satisfactory; Grade 4 - Inadequate.

FE
Further Education

LfL or L4L (League for Learning)
As of 2006, the League for Learning comprises the colleges of City College Norwich, Doncaster College, Guildford College, Hull College, Lewisham College, Knowsley Community College, North Hertfordshire College and West Nottinghamshire College. Their aim is to share good practice which will enhance the life of the learner.

LLUK (Lifelong Learning UK)
Lifelong Learning UK is 'the Sector Skills Council for employers who deliver and/or support the delivery of lifelong learning' (LSC, 2005, p 3).

LSC (Learning and Skills Council)
The Learning and Skills Council is responsible within the education and skills sector for 'assuring the quality of provision and the effectiveness of providers in meeting skills needs and priorities' (LSC, 2005, p. 7).

LSDA (Learning and Skills Development Agency)
The LSDA evolved in 2006 into the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA), responsible for the former policy and strategic work of the LSDA, and the Learning and Skills Network (LSN), who have taken on continuing LSDA programmes, research, training and consultancy projects.

Ofsted (The Office for Standards in Education)
The Office for Standards in Education (England) is a 'non-ministerial government department accountable to Parliament with responsibility for contributing to the provision of better education and care through effective inspection and regulation'. This is achieved through inspection and regulation of childcare, schools, colleges, children's services, teacher training and youth work (Ofsted, 2006b).

PIAP
Post-Inspection Action Plan

QIA (Quality Improvement Agency)
The QIA was formed in April 2006 with the re-organisation of the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA). The policy and strategic work formerly the responsibility of the LSDA became the remit of the QIA, a non-departmental public body responsible for supporting and enabling quality improvement across the learning and skills sector. See www.qia.org.uk for further information.

SAR (Self-Assessment Report)
The Self-Assessment Report is produced annually by learning providers and includes a self-evaluation of their provision according to the five questions of the Common

Inspection Framework (CIF). It must evidence their judgements (based on the common grading scale) and identify strengths and weaknesses in provision. The SAR is used by Ofsted and ALI when planning inspections.

WBL (Work Based Learning)
Work Based Learning is learning or training that can take place in the workplace, involving a range of courses, many of which are vocational.

APPENDIX 1: PROJECT DIARY

NATIONAL PEER REVIEW PILOT

PEER REVIEW PILOT: PROJECT DIARY

Please record any thoughts you have as we progress the pilot so that we can more effectively review and evaluate the pilot as both a formative and summative process.

	DATE
➢ **WHAT IS GOING WELL?**	
➢ **WHAT IMPROVEMENTS COULD WE MAKE?**	
➢ **WHAT EVIDENCE IS THERE THAT WE ARE ACHIEVING OUR CAPACITY TO IMPROVE?**	
➢ **WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THE PILOT?**	
➢ **WHAT HAVE YOU OR YOUR COLLEGE LEARNT ABOUT PEER REVIEW?**	
➢ **ARE THERE ANY COMMON THEMES EMERGING?**	
➢ **WHAT BEST PRACTICE HAVE YOU SEEN THAT IS WORTH SHARING?**	

APPENDIX 2: RECORDING PEER REVIEW ACTIVITIES

LEAGUE FOR LEARNING PEER REVIEW PILOT

RECORD OF ACTIVITY

Review
College: _____

Review
Date: _____

Reviewer: _____

Type of
Activity: _____

JUDGEMENTS:

-
-
-
-
-
-

AREAS OF GOOD PRACTICE:

-
-
-
-

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT AND HOW TO IMPROVE:

-
-
-

APPENDIX 3: HOST COLLEGES' FEEDBACK

1. FEEDBACK FROM 'COLLEGE A' FOLLOWING THEIR PEER REVIEW

Was the peer review what you expected it to be? Why/why not?

"It exceeded my expectations because I was expecting it to feel more like an inspection. The reality was there was much more sharing and professional dialogue and it was much more developmental than I had expected. I anticipated some of this but not the level/ depth. It was challenging but less threatening than OFSTED".

"[It was] totally different. After inspection we expected a similar judgemental experience but instead we experienced reviewers with a profound knowledge of Work Based Learning who asked revealing questions in a language understood by learner/employers and college".

"I think the peer review was pretty much as I expected it to be. I was aware that several very experienced individuals were to come in and investigate our current situation for viability - as would be the case with LSC staff or the ALI inspectorate. This is exactly what I believe happened."

"I expected the peer review to feel similar to an inspection, and this was not the case at all. Where inspectors seem to come in with a pre-formed judgement, and you spend the week trying to convince them otherwise, this type of inspection was much more open, yet had the same (if not more) level of integrity."

"I did not really have a formulated expectation of the process. This was because I was aware it was a pilot and therefore I had no concept of previous experience other than inspection. My only hope was that it would focus more on what was happening now and the potential rather than the reflective approach that inspection seemed to take."

"It was much more positive than I expected. We were still suffering the pain and indignity of the grading awarded by Ofsted which was worse than we thought it should have been."

"Yes and no. 'Yes' because I had been to the Preparation Event where there was a lot of sharing of ideas and so I had some thought on what it might involve. 'No' because before the Preparation Event and the peer review there was the slight concern that it might be a little like an Ofsted inspection but this didn't materialise."

"It is difficult, in the first review of the pilot, to say with any confidence what I was expecting. I was very pleased with the approach undertaken by the team. They went out of their way to ensure that the review was done 'with the college' as opposed to done 'to the college'. I had expected more of a balance in the make-up of the team between the two colleges. I'm not sure that we benefited from the experience of one college as much as we did of the other college as we did not have the benefit of a team member from this latter college in either the cross-college review or the visual and performing arts. We have not received the written feedback from the

review some four weeks after the event so are working on our own notes from the verbal feedback overview."

How did you feel about being picked as one of the curriculum areas for review?

"At first I thought well fair enough. We didn't do as well in the inspection and we all want to improve. If I had been the person choosing the areas I would have chosen us."

"I felt quite ok about it. Partly that was to do with the way it was done, how the nominee introduced the whole thing. The nominee was very reassuring. He presented it as being at the forefront [of education] and that it was an opportunity. This was how I took it, an opportunity to look at where we were a year ago and where we are now through fresh eyes. I was positive about it [peer review] and I didn't feel dumped on."

What did you find particularly helpful about the peer review process?

"The reviewers left no stone unturned and opened up lines of communication we did not expect them to follow with Further Educational learners within the college. This gave us the encouragement to address groups of learners on an unplanned basis and is already proving extremely effective in the engagement of FE learners to Apprenticeships."

"I found the openness and honesty extremely helpful – this developed a level of trust which was essential for the peer review."

"The depth of the insight of the reviewers, their analytical skills, the professional dialogue, the challenge and constructive discussions on how to improve, the sharing of experience and ideas/processes."

"The opportunity to get involved in that level of meaningful dialogue about what we are doing, to reflect on what is working well and the areas we need to think about. The off-timetable activity that produced what felt like a very real picture of our organisation."

"That feedback included suggestions for how to maintain, develop and progress with the things the peer review team picked up on, which was extremely beneficial. I felt that this type of inspection had real value in helping us drive forward the college."

"Generally it was nice to have confirmed what 'we believe we already knew' about our situation, this coming from outsiders that are not strictly speaking directly affiliated with government inspectors, was very welcoming indeed. We are aware that we have come a long way over (approx) the past 2 years, though especially over the last 12-13 months and this was investigated and confirmed. The processes used (as far as I'm aware) were conducted very professionally and without that 'wound-up-tight stigma' many associate with the ALI inspectorate."

"I found the approach taken by the team really helpful because they did not come in and take over the building or in large numbers and it felt like our day to day activities continued around the process. The feedback session was very helpful because it was constructive and open and therefore both the format and style worked really well."

"In the broadest sense, I came away from the Ofsted inspection feeling very negative with no idea of how to move forward. After the peer review I was bursting with ideas, feeling that we really achieved something, had shared ideas. I was very positive. From a practical perspective, the opportunity to do a joint observation with one of the peer reviewers was fantastic because you don't get to do these very often and usually this would be done with someone from the same organisation. Doing a joint observation with someone from outside the organisation was enlightening and reassuring as we saw things in the same way."

"It forced me to re-look at what we were doing. We had an Post-Inspection Action Plan which was regularly re-visited but it was useful to look at it in the peer review context with the new inspection process coming into effect. It made me think about what our message is."

Do you think the feedback given by the peer review team was fair. Why/why not?

"It was fair, accurate, challenging and exalted us to do better."

"[The] Feedback was constructive, clear and relative, it allowed us to confirm areas that we needed to develop and it recognised areas we were ready to move forward. The session gave us the confidence to take decisions. The reviewers impressed us with their overall knowledge and depth of insight into the workings of WBL at our college. They have made us ask questions around our delivery and the importance of carry our present momentum forward into the future."

"The feedback was fair – it was evidence based where possible and always balanced."

"[It was] very fair and incredibly insightful considering the relatively short period of time."

"The feedback from the team was fair and the team appeared to have 'got under the skin' of the college so that the softer aspects of quality were noted and the impact of the environment and culture which are fundamental but are often overlooked."

"I believe the feedback was just and fair. The recommendations for the most part seemed to make sense and may very well go to proving that a set of 'external eyes' can be worth their weight in gold."

"Yes, all feedback was fully justified by the peer review team in what they had experienced during the process. The feedback was fair and had integrity. The real positive that came out of the feedback was having the opportunity to discuss the findings further and explore suggestions etc."

"Yes, considering it was so rushed – the scheduling was tight. They [the peer reviewers] were very insightful."

"Yes. It's always difficult to put everything down in writing. Looking at it cold, you wouldn't get the meaning behind some of their comments but I was there at the time so I understand where they were coming from."

If you could change anything about the peer review at your college or in the weeks leading up to the peer review, what would that be?

"It would probably be around confirming the individual schedules for the reviewers well in advance of the review to meet their needs and ideas."

"More time with the reviewers would have been appreciated as it to proved an interesting exercise to measure the robustness of the systems and processes within Work Based Learning."

"As the process evolves it will be easier to prepare colleges and individuals for the process, whilst it was very non-threatening I believe that providing people with more information would be helpful."

"The exciting thing is the fact that this is a very organic process and that we have the opportunity to experiment, to try different approaches and to see what works for us. I wouldn't change anything at this stage, but the flexibility to respond/adapt is really important at this stage."

"Personally I wouldn't change a thing as it seems to have been fine as it was."

"A small increase in time used for the peer review would have been helpful. Everyone felt it was so valuable that more time would have been useful."

"The biggest thing was having time against us. We put a programme together before the team arrived but within half an hour of them arriving it had all changed and we had to plan again. They had two days [for the peer review] but more time was needed. Leading up to the peer review it might have been better if the programme had been agreed jointly."

"This is a difficult one, we approached the inspection with the same vigour we would have done for an Inspection, which I feel should be the case to be able to get the most out of this process, but next time I will be much more open to what we can get out of this type of inspection before the process begins!"

"Maybe if we had had more time to discuss priority areas for the visit, [such as] any problem areas for improvement, but then this may have determined too heavily how the peer review went and it wouldn't have picked up the ancillary information that it did.
It would have also been quite useful to have had time to talk through and resolve issues that came up, whether positive or negative. It all had to be done on the hoof because there was so little time. Also the learning and teaching observations were cut short and so really were just snap shots. I felt guilty that the peer reviewers were trying to do so much and disappointed that their itinerary had to be cut short. But it's all about balancing their time as well – they had to give up their time to come and do the peer review. I don't know how reasonable it would be to allow more time."

"We presented this as a peer review to our staff but in error they started to call it a 'mock inspection'. They obviously felt the pressure even though we were open and transparent and we didn't ask them to do any extra work.

We did warn them that they may be observed and that should they be asked to provide any information that this would need to be done quickly given the timescale. After the event they started to call it a peer review and were positive about it, either because they hadn't been aware of it actually happening [i.e. it was non-intrusive] or because they had been involved and welcomed the feedback it had generated."

What is the most important thing you took away with you following the peer review and why?

"That the process can be completely different to inspection."

"Confidence in the moving forward towards the re-inspection visit and the future."

"From our college perspective, a real sense of pride in the confirmation that the WBL team have made huge improvements over a relatively short period of time. From another perspective the benefits of the opportunity to meet like-minded colleagues and share our journey as honestly as possible and to explore our capacity to improve."

"The peer review was a really positive experience, to have an outside view on what we are doing, that is constructive, critical, honest yet supportive was a great motivator."

"The most important thing I took away was that this was a process about improving and sharing not about monitoring or assessment but recognising and celebrating good practice."

"Complacency is a dangerous thing! It has reminded us (well definitely me anyway) that some systems need reviewing to help 'raise the bar' somewhat."

"[For me it was] ideas, for example the different ways of approaching development plans. I came away feeling positive and quite inspired. It is a real bonus if you come away feeling really positive about how to progress quality improvement and that was how I felt. [I've started to implement some of these ideas] for example, I am in the process of organising more joint observations where there will be one of our curriculum team leaders with a member of our cross-college observation team. I have plans to re-structure the area, to look at the process of team self-assessment and I am going to produce blown up 'development plans' (rather than 'action plans') to go over staff desks so that there is a sense of ownership of them."

"Personally, it reminded me that it is quite useful to share concerns. Often we don't want to admit problems and this means that you just end up reinventing the wheel. I think integrity was maintained for several reasons: distance of the college meant that we weren't competing but also the approach taken by visiting staff – their remit was clear from the start."

If you could sum up the peer review in one word what would that be?

"Challenging!"
"Enlightening"

"Exciting"
"Justifiable"
"Challenging"
"Inspiring"
"Enlightening"
"Positive"
"Invigorating"

Do you have any other comments about the peer review you wish to add?

"I hope that the peer review team found this learning experience as positive and enriching as we did."

"A big thank you to them [the peer review team] and the way they handled the inspection process, they put our staff, employers and learners at ease and helped to make this process such a positive and memorable one."

"One important area of this approach is the development for the teams and individuals involved which will provide that overall wider development in addition to the sharing of good practice."

"It is a wonderful opportunity to be instrumental in the development of the future of FE."

"Personally some sort of follow up would be useful. It would be good to maintain links. I don't want these to disappear. The process should gather momentum and share good practice. It would be a shame if this were lost. It would also be nice to have a forum for staff from different colleges to get together and share ideas and good practice."

2.   FEEDBACK FROM 'COLLEGE B' FOLLOWING THEIR PEER REVIEW

Was the peer review what you expected it to be. Why/why not?

"No, it was also used to give information for our faculty review … I thought it was a method of highlighting strengths/weaknesses in an informal way and then being able to share good practice."

"It was what I expected because I had the opportunity to arrange the programme. We had various explicit objectives that we wanted to get out of that from a discussion with the principal and the nominee beforehand and I think we did meet those objectives."

"I feel the same [see above quote], that we were able to set the agenda and we also had clear guidelines."

Did you find the peer review process to be helpful or not? Please explain why/why not.

"Initially yes and I am going to one of the other colleges with some of my team to look at how we can improve in some areas."

"I found it personally very helpful. It's always very good to hear people describe your own work and own institution."

"What was particularly helpful was looking at how we have self assessed ourselves and judging us against us but I'd expected that. What was the nice thing was they then looked at how we had accurately self assessed, you have put in place things to move to the next stage but they were then looking beyond that … how are you going to stretch and move forward beyond even that point. So whilst we had done the safe actions, the things purely to address the weaknesses, they pointed out that we needed to look at the things that were going to make this excellent … When we looked at systems, for example, the course review system, they [the peer review team] said that it was an excellent system [but they reminded us] to get our head up occasionally, [asking us] 'are you actually using this system rather than just recording?' They are all things that we would have come to ourselves in the next six to nine months but because these processes are all so new we are so involved in getting them right that we hadn't looked at the future beyond these."

"I agree with that [see above quote]. They were taking us beyond what we could see as a remedy or an action point to address moving from the grade we are. Then it was helpful that they were thinking of beyond that, of support for us and how to keep that pace going. They could see a lot of drive and enthusiasm but it was [a case of] how we were going to sustain it … and that [input] was very helpful."

"There was three aspects [to what I found particularly helpful], one being sharing that experience with those colleagues, so you've got a team who are delivering peer review, and they involved me pretty extensively, because as I said, they thought the feedback might be a little challenging ... They wanted me involved so I could suggest some strategies [in how to present the feedback]. But in the end I didn't do … [this]. It was quite interesting. They wanted me to hear it first. Isn't it intriguing that during that time there was … no time for social discussion or any of that, there was no time talking about football or talking about truth and meaning, or people's children or whatever. Nothing. They [the peer review team] concentration for some fifty four hours or whatever it was, solely on the focus of teaching and learning and the activities. I was saying over dinner as well, the discussion was primarily about the nature of teaching and learning activities. That's why people are tired in the end. Because they're worn out. The professionalism of people is just extraordinary… The second particularly helpful aspect was that internally within our organisation, people had to stand up and recognise that we do need to take a lot more perspectives than we have here. It moved us a little bit outside our current normal parlance of working, and that's what really, really was exceptionally helpful. And thirdly, in terms of what was particularly successful, and had a particularly successful outcome, the very fact that contacts had been made and they are currently being pursued. One area of learning, for example, before we went to the L4L Festival, they wanted to know the contact details of one of the peer reviewers who works in the same curriculum area … and that level of contact is one of the most significant outcomes of this. What you're getting is direct contact with the other organisations and what they do, and the ability [to contact people who have shared a common experience] and that intensity means that you really go there and treat people with real professional respect and credibility. And therefore I think … the idea of going and talking with someone directly about the work that they do, with a set of questions and seeing some examples and

getting a buzz from that. That's really, really interesting and [offers] much more potential for learning. You will bring things back that will make a difference to the organisation. So those are the three aspects I'd say. I'd say working with colleagues… the overall level of analysis got us to see outside our boxes a little bit, and the level of contact."

Do you think the feedback given by the peer review team was fair and constructive. Why/why not?

"[The] feedback was generally fair and mainly correct."

"Absolutely."

"Yes. There were a couple of bits that I would have wished to explain more but these were minor. Certainly the bigger issues were spot on."

"For me it was absolutely robust. It's extraordinary how inspired and acute the level of commentary was in that short period of time. It gave us lots of food for thought, I think, really interesting thinking about what we're going to do and how we're going to move ahead."

What is the most important thing you took away with you following the peer review and why?

"That we are not alone."

"Don't just plan the next step, plan the next five steps. Don't just look to move from a [grade] 3 to a [grade] 2 but from a [grade] 3 to a [grade]1."

"To have a bigger picture. It's difficult sometimes… you can get bogged down in the day-to-day and to be creative and think beyond this is hard to do."

"Everything is about addressing weaknesses, our post-inspection plan. All that does is address weaknesses and doesn't get us to look at improving on our strengths. That is what I got from the review, to think about the next step."

"[For me it was making] contacts at other colleges and being able to visit to share good practice."

"It sounds really strange but I would have liked more time with them [the peer review team], as a listener, to see how they came to some of the decisions they did, for example what was it about the ILP form that they didn't like, I'd have liked to hear that discussion. On the other hand you do want your staff to be open and honest and it wouldn't have been possible to be there."

If you could change anything about the peer review at this college or in the weeks leading up to the peer review, what would that be?

"I think it would have been nice to have them here for two whole days, to have given the feedback on the morning of the third day to give them more time for reflection. When I met them on the Friday morning that had a list of really pertinent questions because they had had the time the evening

before to assimilate everything and plan. If I were doing the review I would want the second night to write the report the following morning. What also would have been nice would have been to have their CVs [profiles] earlier. I only got one as the other person changed at the last minute. I ended up focussing one of them on the areas of their strengths but this would have been useful for the other person."

"We didn't have any CVs [profiles]! As we had only just finished our [annual system of classroom] observations, planning and scheduling seemed to be an endless task. Even so there is never a right time but it would have been nice to have had a little more time to plan [the review]."

If you could sum up the peer review in a few words what would that be?

"[A] double edged sword!"

"Learning"

"Challenging but supportive".

3. FEEDBACK FROM 'COLLEGE C' FOLLOWING THEIR PEER REVIEW

Was the peer review what you expected it to be. Why/why not?

"It went over my expectations in a way. The peer review team covered more ground than I expected them to. We got back raw feedback, it wasn't sanitised in any way. I think that was because they presented encounters [round the college] as they had actually been. This is another example of the difference between peer review and Ofsted. With Ofsted you are presented with high level judgements but get little explanation for how these judgements have been reached. This comes from them being able to triangulate evidence."

"The introduction of a student [in the peer review team] was quite charming and very powerful. He was able to talk peer-to-peer in a very informal way. On reflection, I would have engaged the Student Union more in the process so that they were able to get more out of it. Including a student in the team was a good way of strengthening and increasing the capacity of the learner voice."

"The peer review felt very focused. There were three main areas for questions. The programme organised was quite controlling. Meetings were organised to demonstrate examples of good practice and to show areas for development. It was difficult because of timing – the peer review coming so close after the Ofsted inspection. Staff felt quite worn out by the inspection. On the other hand, we were ripe for the feedback that peer review provided. It has been used to help formulate the PIAP as it gave a detailed diagnosis of issues and how we can improve things. David Bell commented recently of inspection that it must shine a light in all the dark corners. Peer review leads the team into the darkest corners and shines a light for them."

"I experienced only a small part of the peer review consisting of a short interview concerning retention in the section, which I answered as fully as I could, offering our strategies and ways of coping with what is a perennial problem. I found it quite gentle but I thought that the timing for us was poor as this is the busiest time … and the time when our teaching is at its least formulaic."

What did you find particularly helpful about the peer review process?

"I was nervous about the reaction of SME to the feedback. They were receptive to it because they are a dynamic management team. A PIAP meeting was held last week and the written feedback from the peer review was circulated for that meeting so it has had an impact."

"I thought that the process keeps the issue of retention at the forefront of my thoughts as I work out solutions to deal with the management of students and staff."

Do you think the feedback given by the peer review team was critical and fair?

"Absolutely."

"I'm not sure I have seen it."

If you could change anything about the peer review at your college or in the weeks leading up to it, what would that be?

"As I said before, engaging the Student Union in the process would be one example. Also, some improvement could have been made to the learner focus groups but this was partly down to not having administrative support at the time … I think I would have better prepared the directors and vice principals too as peer review was not given the prominence it should have been … I don't think it would happen again as they are more aware of what peer review is about. I think the staff that the peer review team came into contact with were well-prepared as I had spoken individually to nearly all of them. I think this could have been tackled with senior management."

What is the most important thing you took away with you following the peer review and why?

"You get out what you put in. It could easily pass you by. I thought the peer review team was brilliant, the peer review was the best one so far. I think this was because I learned from the second event about structuring the days. They were very focused and apart from some poor attendance at the learner focus groups, the experience I had of peer review already helped me to organise the day to get the best out of it, such as what discussions and evidence would be needed [by the peer review team to comment on the issues that we had put to them]. The team was well-matched, for example the WBL element of the peer review team had excellent practice that they were able to draw on. There is some debate about whether or not we should always focus on areas for development in peer review events, or whether we should also look at examples of existing good practice. I think that this should be left up to colleges to decide, that it should be left open. For example, next year I am going to

use peer review in a different way by looking at curriculum areas and validating their strengths and areas for improvement."

"That the inspection process never ends."

If you could sum up the peer review in one word what would that be?

"Useful"

Do you have any other comments about the peer review that you would like to add?

"I would like to add some comments on team leadership. Peer review could so easily go pear shaped [with the wrong leadership]. Our lead person is very good in their role at inspiring and comforting people, making them feel confident. This is really important for the success of peer review."

APPENDIX 4: PERSONAL STATEMENT BY RESEARCHER

This project was at all times challenging, absorbing and fascinating. Not only did I observe a considerable amount of personal and professional development amongst the project participants but I too experienced a steep learning curve in many ways. It was absorbing because it involved interaction between people on so many different levels and because it truly resulted in such a fascinating dialogue; I witnessed a concept gather momentum and come to fruition in this project. It continues apace.

The project was challenging because I had to be aware of the fact that I was not truly involved in the process as the participants were, that I had to maintain a sense of objectivity. This was difficult in the face of such enthusiasm. This enthusiasm was 'catching' nonetheless, in the sense that it motivated me to document impartially the processes I observed to the best of my ability. I hope I have done justice to the project and to its many participants who, I felt, welcomed me as one of their peers throughout.