

Peer referencing within the FE system

Some case studies on emerging sector practice

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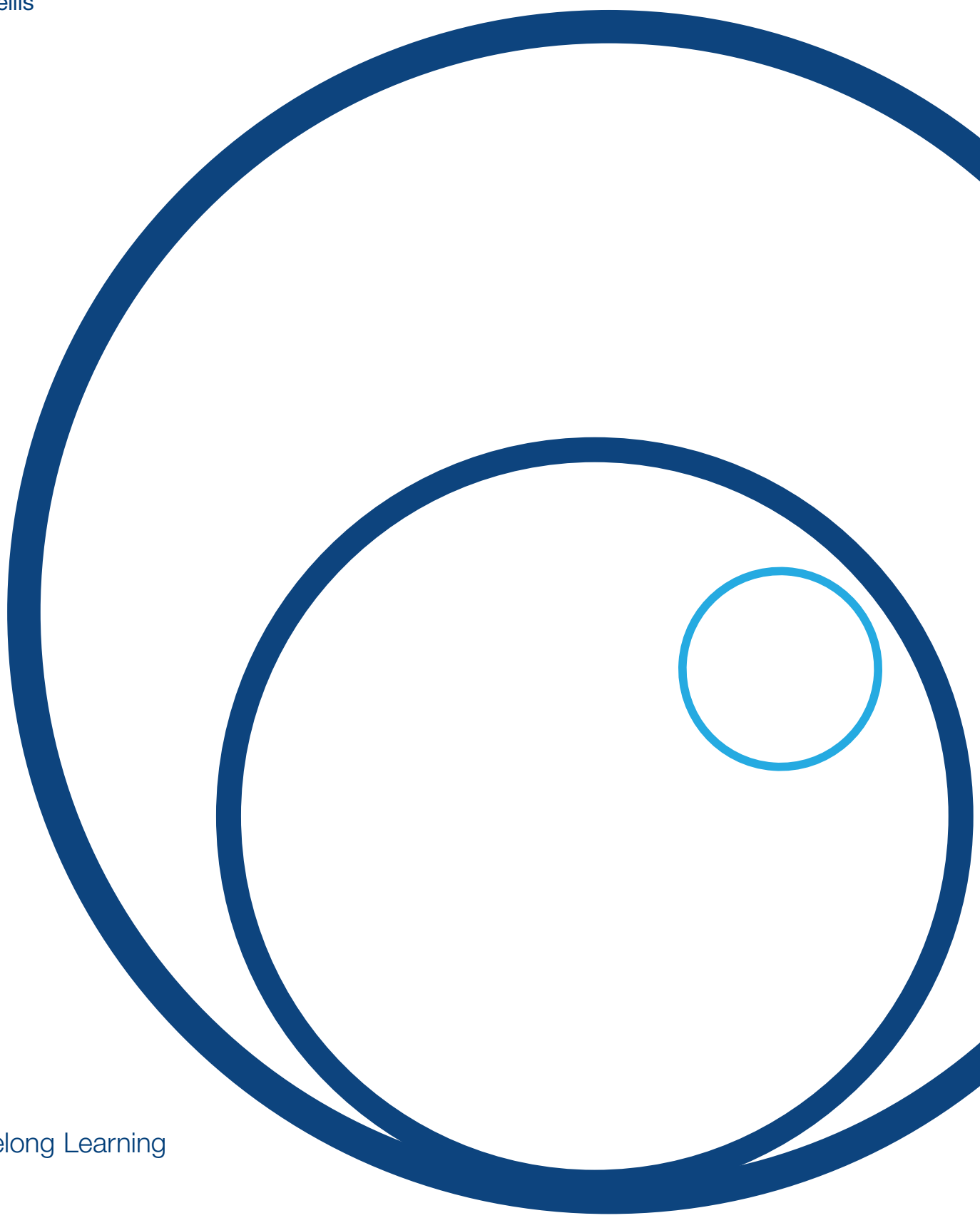


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1 Introduction

1.1 Aims of the research

The Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) to conduct an evaluation of the National Peer Referencing Pilots in September 2006.¹ At the same time, QIA requested IES to undertake an additional small-scale study to explore the scope and nature of peer referencing activities taking place beyond the framework of the pilot project. This report presents the main findings from the study, which aimed to:

- Locate the pilot project within the context of broader developments in peer referencing across the further education system.
- Present some case studies of peer referencing projects taking place outside the national pilot project and explore their key features, e.g. the models and approaches used, types of partnership, range of peer referencing themes, and activities.
- Consider any useful lessons which could be learnt to inform further developments in self-improvement and self-regulation within the sector.

It should be emphasised that this small-scale research project was not intended to present a comprehensive picture of peer referencing developments taking place across the sector but to convey the following key messages:

- Peer referencing within the further education system is not a new phenomenon; some providers have been developing peer review methodologies and practices over a number of years. This opens up the possibility of establishing a wider network of FE providers to learn from each other and share good practice.
- There has been a significant growth in peer referencing initiatives and activities in recent months, partly stimulated by the national pilots but also through the facilitative work of the QIA, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and other agencies. New peer referencing projects are engaging an increasingly diverse range of learning providers including FE and sixth-form colleges, LEAs, providers within the Work Based Learning (WBL), Adult and Community Learning (ACL)², and Community and Voluntary (CVS) sectors, and cross sectoral partnerships.

1.2 Research methods

Initial background information was gathered about peer referencing activities among colleges and other FE providers by means of an Internet search and through contacts provided by the QIA, regional LSCs and other informants. A number of telephone conversations took place with Provider Development Managers and Learning Quality Directors from regional LSCs, senior college staff, and other stakeholders, providing leads about projects or initiatives which included

some element of peer referencing. A representative selection of these projects was followed up, and they are profiled in Chapter 3 of this report.

For the case studies, a further 12 telephone and face-to-face interviews were conducted with a range of respondents in order to explore further background information about the projects, as well as the rationale for becoming involved in collaborative partnerships focused on quality improvement. Key informants in this phase of the research included co-ordinators and managers of learning provider networks, quality directors and other senior managers within colleges, and consultants from the Learning and Skills Network. The interviews aimed to explore respondents' views on the following: strengths and positive outcomes from peer referencing activities; any challenges or negative outcomes; and respondents' views on the main lessons learnt from their experience of peer referencing.

In addition, a desk-based analysis of a range of documentary materials relating to the peer referencing case studies was conducted. This helped identify and compare the key features of the case studies, such as history and background to the partnership; peer referencing approaches and methodologies; and the main peer referencing activities carried out and planned for the future.

1.3 Report outline

The following chapters present:

- Chapter 2: a brief background to peer referencing.
- Chapter 3: some case studies of peer referencing partnerships, including both well-established ones and more recent initiatives, facilitated mainly through the QIA Development Programme or regional LSCs.
- Chapter 4: main conclusions and future developments.

¹ Bellis, A. et al. (2007) Evaluation of the National Peer Referencing Pilots, IES.

² Halex, a national network of adult education providers, has recently completed a survey of peer referencing activity in the ACL sector and their report is available from the QIA.

2 What is peer referencing?

2.1 Defining peer referencing

Peer referencing, or peer review, has been practised within the further education system over a number of years. However, it has come into greater prominence recently, and its value has been recognised by both QIA and the LSC as a key element within their strategies for promoting quality improvement and self-regulation across the sector.¹

QIA, having noted that there was a lack of clarity within the sector about the nature of peer referencing and how it should be carried out, proposed the following definition:

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

In a briefing paper designed to support the work of the national pilots and similar projects, QIA further elaborated the purposes and scope of peer referencing, emphasising the incorporation of both assessment-focused and development-focused activities within the process:

*... peer referencing has both an **assessment** function that includes benchmarking and the validation of self-assessment judgements and an **improvement** function that includes joint action planning, the sharing and transfer of good practice and collective support for quality improvement. Both elements are necessary to support the requirements of a self-regulating sector where providers are capable of working together (a) to make rigorous judgements on quality and standards, (b) to take collective action to deal with underperformance, and (c) to assume shared responsibilities for improvement.²*

Peer referencing should also include a range of support activities such as project governance and management, project planning, selection and training of staff, and resource allocation.

2.2 The scope of peer referencing

The National Peer Referencing Pilot, designed to identify and test out different models and approaches to peer referencing, successfully demonstrated its flexibility and adaptability to a range of different organisational contexts and purposes. For example, while some projects developed a 'whole organisational review' model, others took a more thematic approach, focusing on different curriculum areas or performance in relation to themes such as employer engagement, learner voice or leadership and management. In each case, the particular approach was determined by the needs and priorities of the partner colleges. The pilot evaluation concluded that this flexibility was an important aspect of effective peer referencing, although it should be balanced against a commitment to commonly agreed protocols, values and codes of conduct.

The case studies presented in the following chapter provide further evidence of this flexibility and of the growing range of providers who are currently adopting peer referencing as a mechanism for both validation of self-assessments and for collaborative action towards quality improvement.

- ¹ LSC (2005) Learning and Skills – the Agenda for Change: The Prospectus, LSC; QIA (2007) Pursuing Excellence: the national improvement strategy for the further education system, QIA.
- ² Cox, P. (2006) Peer referencing, self-improvement and self-regulation within the learning and skills sector, QIA.

3 Peer referencing case studies

For this study, a number of networks of providers were identified and contacted, all of whom were involved to some extent in peer referencing activities. These ranged from long-standing partnerships established over a number of years, to more recent experimental collaborations of providers working together for the first time. The case studies presented in the following sections are intended to reflect a representative sample of this peer referencing work, and to outline key features such as type of partnership, management arrangements, funding and support, and the aims and focus of peer referencing activities.

3.1 Well-established peer referencing partnerships

At the more 'historical' end of the peer referencing spectrum were consortia of colleges which had developed their peer referencing and other collaborative activities over a number of years, as a means of improving quality and standards of provision among their members.

3.1.1 Hampshire External Quality Review

This is a well-established, self-brokered partnership of 25 colleges based in South East England, covering mainly Hampshire, Surrey and Sussex. The consortium was created originally in 1993-1994 by a group of sixth-form college principals who wanted to set up a regular cycle of quality review visits, in order to support quality improvement across the membership as well as prepare colleges for inspection. Over the years, membership has been extended to include FE colleges as well, and the overall approach to quality review has been adapted to reflect the increased diversity of membership. Co-ordination of the scheme is undertaken by the EQR Manager, whose role is to arrange programmes of review visits, organise training for reviewers and liaise with the member colleges. Overall strategic direction is provided by a steering group consisting of college principals and vice-principals. The scheme is funded entirely through membership fees from participating colleges, and these mainly cover the manager's post and fees for the independent advisers.

One of the key features of the EQR Scheme is the role played by external advisers (all with HMI experience) who support the review process and offer advice and guidance to the peer reviewers. According to the EQR Manager, the external consultants attend the second day of a two day review visit to meet with the reviewers, pick up any issues that may have emerged from the first day of the review, and discuss how to give critical feedback. They also attend the feedback sessions to curriculum teams and/or senior management teams, edit the written feedback report and ensure it is delivered on time to the host college.

The reviews can be of the full institutional or thematic type and have, in the past, focused on areas such as quality assurance systems, governance, leadership and management, equal opportunities, and student services. The reviews can also be primarily curriculum focused and include observations of teaching and learning, and validation of SARs in various curriculum areas. A range of peer referencing

processes are adopted and the emphasis can shift between more formal peer assessment on the one hand, and 'softer' peer support and the sharing of good practice on the other, depending on the requirements of the college under review.

The colleges themselves identify members of staff with appropriate skills and experience to act as reviewers and they receive training in classroom observation, gathering evidence, and giving oral and written feedback. EQR have also produced a range of training materials to support their work including training packs and a handbook for peer referencing. The review framework is based on the Common Inspection Framework and this is viewed as a 'good selling point' to potential new members, wishing to improve their performance at inspection.

3.1.2 FE Sussex

This is another well-established network of 12 FE providers across East and West Sussex (six GFE colleges, five sixth-form colleges and one specialist college) with a particular remit to improve the quality of provision among the membership. Besides the core members, there is also a networking function with Sussex LSC, Sussex Enterprise (representing business interests across the county), careers services and local authorities.

FE Sussex is a private company, limited by guarantee, with a board of directors comprising principals from the member colleges. It was first established about ten years ago. Day to day management is the responsibility of a Chief Executive Officer, supported by networks of managers within the colleges with particular areas of expertise. Funding for FE Sussex comes from a number of sources including membership fees, Sussex LSC, the Learning and Skills network, QIA, the South East Economic Development Agency (SEEDA) and European Funding.

FE Sussex launched a three year Quality Improvement Strategy in 2006 with the longer-term aim of supporting the quality improvement needs of member colleges and helping them move towards self-regulation. The particular model of peer referencing developed by FE Sussex is an integral part of the strategy and is linked to a form of 'internal consultancy':

... a process designed to identify personnel in the member colleges who have particular specialisms, experience or expertise that can be used to support quality improvement in other colleges.¹

According to this model, internal consultants are identified, trained and then "used extensively within the delivery of the whole Quality Improvement Strategy and Action Plan". The role of FE Sussex is to act as the 'intelligent broker' of the system by helping providers find appropriate sources of support and expertise.

An interview with the Chief Executive of FE Sussex provided further information about particular initiatives incorporating peer referencing processes, which have focused on the two key areas of work-based learning, and leadership and management. For example:

- Peer referencing has played a key role in the partnership's employer engagement strategy. One outcome of this has been that six of the participating colleges have gained accreditation in 'Action for Business', which is the SE regional quality standard for employer engagement.
- FE Sussex is the lead organisation in an innovative work-based learning project, which is currently in its pilot phase. The initiative involves 10 colleges, an independent work-based learning provider and a number of Sussex schools, and the aim is to develop a new tool to evaluate the delivery of work-based learning in a variety of contexts. This project is funded by the QIA.
- With regard to leadership and management, FE Sussex run an annual 'Management Challenge' initiative in which individual colleges are invited to identify key management areas they would like to address, and are then supported by other members with appropriate skills and expertise.
- Another initiative, strongly linked to peer referencing, involved a group of middle managers meeting together for 'action learning' or 'problem solving' sessions around particular issues and challenges which lent themselves to collective action, e.g. geographical variations in learner success rates across the county, and development of training in leadership and management.

As with Hampshire EQR, there is recognition that different member colleges have different needs and that *"not everybody has to participate in every single initiative"*. This is reinforced by the FE Sussex website, which states that:

We do recognise the individual requirements of our members. The power of the network is most certainly not 'one size fits all'.²

3.1.3 PDP Shropshire

PDP Shropshire is another consortium of colleges which has adopted the strategy of employing a manager, whose role includes co-ordination of quality improvement and CPD activities, and securing appropriate sources of funding to support new initiatives. PDP Shropshire was formed in 2002, in response to the 'Success for All' strategy, and comprises six general FE and sixth-form colleges across the county. Quality improvement was identified as a key aim of the partnership which was receiving active support from the Shropshire LSC. The main focus of PDP Shropshire activities has been on a collaborative approach to developing a range of professional development opportunities for teaching and support staff:

The formation of the partnership represents recognition of the need for the colleges to collaborate in order to address common training and development needs which cannot, currently, be fully addressed by individual colleges working alone.³

According to the PDP Shropshire Manager, some colleges in the partnership have been involved in peer referencing activities, such as observations of teaching and learning; the validation of SARs in various curriculum areas; attendance at each

other's SAR validation events; and reviews of cross-college processes and procedures. However, due to the self-regulation agenda, there was recognition of the need to develop these activities in a more formalised and systematic way across the partnership as a whole. The consortium also wanted to engage a wider range of staff in peer review activities (such as middle managers and teaching staff), as these were currently restricted to senior managers. The PDP Manager felt that the benefits of wider inclusivity would need to be balanced against the additional costs and logistical difficulties this would entail.

Another challenge faced by PDP Shropshire was that, due to restructuring, they would shortly be incorporating providers from Hereford and Worcester, expanding the partnership to 16 members. Future plans would include the establishment of peer referencing activities on a more formalised basis as a focus for developing the new partnership, as well as consolidating the existing one. The manager was planning to engage the services of an external consultant from the Learning and Skills Network to support these new developments.

3.1.4 North East Peer Referencing Group

The NE Peer Referencing Group, consisting of five GFE colleges and a community college, has also been in existence for about five years, as a primarily informal quality forum focusing on the sharing of good practice and the validation of SARs across member colleges. As with PDP Shropshire, the partners had recently decided to establish their collaborative activities on a more formalised basis, for example through the following:

- Obtaining primary evidence for SAR validation through the observations of teaching and learning, and use of student focus groups.
- Making more systematic use of curriculum expertise within partner colleges in peer referencing activities.

At the time of interview, no formal decision had been made about the leadership and management arrangements for this new initiative. The Group were seeking support from their regional LSC to help them move this plan forward and to develop a longer-term strategy for conducting peer referencing over the next three years. The initiative was self-funded and, as with other partnerships, motivated by the move towards greater self-regulation across the FE sector.

3.2 More recent peer referencing initiatives

This research study took place at a time of significant growth in new peer referencing initiatives and networks across the country. Much of this work has been generated through the QIA development programme, which has aimed to encourage a broader range of peer referencing schemes, for example, between partners in the adult and community learning (ACL) and work-based learning (WBL) sectors, as well as cross-sectoral partnerships. Specific funding streams have been made available to support this work including the 'Beacon Innovation Fund', 'Support for Success' and 'Train to Gain'. There have also been plans to develop peer referencing as a key element of the Skills for Life Improvement

Programme. It is interesting to note that colleges involved in the National Peer Referencing Pilots have also been instrumental in the development of some of these new initiatives.

3.2.1 Beacon providers

Learning and Skills Beacon status is awarded to providers in the further education system in recognition of their outstanding achievements in their provision of teaching and learning. Many Beacon providers have participated in development programmes organised by the QIA, which encourage the creation of collaborative projects designed to “*test, pilot or develop a variety of new and innovative approaches to improve the sector’s as well as their own performance*”.⁴ Some providers have accessed Beacon Innovation funding specifically to focus on the collaborative development of peer referencing methodologies, and these partnerships include a range of providers from the FE, ACL, WBL and voluntary sectors. Some Beacon providers have been involved in cross-sectoral peer referencing projects, as outlined in Section 3.2.4.

One partnership of four East Midlands colleges, which took part in the national pilot project, was taking advantage of the Beacon status of one of the partners to extend their peer referencing work. The partnership, which had only been in existence for about a year, was planning to move beyond the validation of self-assessment in various curriculum areas to include a range of cross-college themes, with a particular focus on ‘the learner journey’ as well as the institutional capacity to improve. According to a respondent from one of the colleges, the new project would provide an opportunity to ‘drill down further’ than previous SAR assessments and to collect primary evidence of performance, through observations of teaching and learning, and conversations with learners. The additional funding would be used to support the organisation of joint curriculum and professional development events.

Other Beacon Innovation projects, both regional and national, were exploring the potential of peer referencing to enhance their institutional capacity to improve, identify areas of under-performance and develop strategies for addressing these. In terms of the question about whether peer referencing should be undertaken between ‘providers operating at different levels of performance’, there were differences of approach among these Beacon projects. While some lead colleges chose to work exclusively with other Beacon providers, others had formed partnerships with colleges at varying levels of performance.

There was evidence from the research that some Beacon providers were also actively engaged in exploring how peer referencing could be adapted to meet the needs of organisations within the ACL sector. For example, one college of residential adult education, based in Yorkshire and Humberside, was developing a regional network of adult education providers (including local authority and voluntary organisations) in order to:

... ensure that self-assessment, quality improvement planning and observation of teaching and learning are robust and provide a secure platform for internal quality improvement in the ACL sector, which in the

past has had weaknesses in these areas, as outlined in inspection reports.

To complement work undertaken as part of this project, QIA commissioned HOLEX (a national network of local adult learning providers) and Open Door (a voluntary adult learning provider) to conduct a survey of current peer referencing practice within the adult learning sector.

3.2.2 Employer engagement and 'Train to Gain'

Some provider partnerships, which had participated in the National Peer Referencing Pilots, were extending the range of their peer referencing activities as a means of improving standards in employer responsiveness. For example, one well-established partnership from the East Midlands was engaged in an LSC-funded project designed to develop more effective self-assessment tools in employer engagement and to test partners' performance in this area against the regional 'Emskills' quality standard.⁵ At the time of interview, exploration of partners' performance in this area included peer review visits; observations of work-based teaching and learning; and 'mystery shopping', which would take the form of recorded telephone enquiries about services for employers.

It was interesting to note that the partnership of six colleges, which conducted full institutional reviews within the pilot project, was planning to take a 'softer' approach with respect to employer engagement, as this was an area in which the partners generally felt less confident. The approach would therefore be more developmental, with an emphasis on observations and recommendations to improve practice rather than 'making judgements'. One senior manager, who had been instrumental in developing this area of work within the partnership, commented:

... in terms of employer engagement, everybody's got a huge journey to make. So it was a sort of almost a softer approach – we did it very much on the basis of observations and suggestions for development. So we weren't going in trying to make judgements because we felt it was too early in the day really for us to make that sort of assessment.

Another reason for a more cautious and exploratory approach was sensitivity to the potential for more intense competition in this area of work:

... I think in terms of employer engagement, colleges do see themselves much more as competitors, understandably, because ... we're all competing for that same business in a sense. So we took that softer approach because we wanted to get people working together in that respect.

A number of other partnerships, including providers from the college, WBL and ACL sectors, have recently taken advantage of the 'Train to Gain' Development Programme which is "designed to help all providers to deliver their employer-facing provision more effectively". An important aim of the 'Train to Gain' strategy is to facilitate groupings of providers to carry out peer referencing work under the two

key themes of ‘developing flexible delivery’ and ‘working with employers as customers’.

One such initiative, which was still in the planning stages at the time of interview, involved two of the East Midlands partners (Castle College and West Nottinghamshire College) in a new national partnership with East Devon, Loughborough, North Hertfordshire, and Yeovil Colleges. The project was being supported by QIA through ‘Train to Gain’ funding, and, as with the other employer engagement project, was led by West Nottinghamshire College. This development illustrates a growing trend for some colleges, who had built up experience of peer referencing within one partnership, to become involved in other provider networks, both regional and national.

The aim of the new project would be to test providers’ performance in employer engagement against the new National Standards⁶, but with a particular focus on ‘gateway’ services, such as handling initial enquiries, referrals etc. Consequently, the peer referencing element was planned to focus more on these services, and on the role of support staff in colleges, rather than on teaching and learning. There would also be an emphasis on developing more robust systems of data collection relating to employer engagement as *“this is an area people are struggling with”*.

3.2.3 Work-based learning providers

Another significant development in the recent expansion of peer referencing activities has been the engagement of providers from the WBL sector. As part of this study, interviews were conducted with respondents involved in two similar WBL projects, one in the East Midlands (the East Midlands Peer Challenge Project group) and the other organised by the Tyne and Wear Association of WBL Providers. In both of these small-scale projects, each involving six training providers, funding had been accessed through the ‘Support for Success’ programme, which had been used to engage the services of an external consultant to facilitate peer referencing and other collaborative activities. There were also similarities in the aims and planned activities of the two initiatives, which were focused on conducting peer review visits; the validation of SARs; identifying areas of weakness; and encouraging strategies for quality improvement.

Interviews with respondents from both projects referred to the fact that tensions between a collaborative approach and the competitive market were particularly acute within the WBL sector. One respondent commented that a major challenge of the exercise had been in encouraging the providers to stop seeing each other as competitors and to realise the advantages of a collaborative approach to improving quality. In particular, he felt there should be recognition that *“... sharing can improve public perception of all the providers as a group”*.

This point was reinforced by a respondent from the other partnership who felt that, as peer referencing was a relatively new concept within the sector, time was needed to build up effective peer relationships. However, in terms of the wider self-regulation agenda, there was a growing acknowledgement that *“this is a journey which we can’t opt out of”*.

3.2.4 Cross-sectoral projects

Finally, there was evidence from the research of peer referencing partnerships which were aiming to work across traditional sector boundaries.

One such cross-sectoral project was developing a peer referencing methodology to assess and improve the quality of provision across a partnership of Beacon providers from the college, WBL and ACL sectors. Funded by QIA, the project was jointly managed by the participating colleges and was formed of two groups, focusing respectively on the themes of learner engagement and employer engagement. Both projects were aiming to examine the transferability of practice across very different organisational settings and to *“help providers learn from examples of good practice developed in sectors of further education other than their own”*.

Another innovative project was based in the East of England and took the form of a large ‘multi-sectoral’ peer referencing project involving 12 groups of over 40 providers, including general FE, sixth-form and specialist colleges, ACL and WBL providers, and three secondary schools. Some of these groupings were built on existing partnerships, while others were working together for the first time. A project steering group was set up by the regional LSC, which included representatives from partner organisations as well as the QIA and Learning and Skills Network (LSN). Co-ordination of the project was undertaken by an LSN consultant.

The project received active support from both the QIA, through its ‘Support for Success’ development funding and the East of England regional LSC which offered brokerage of partnerships, access to external consultancy, organisation of training and promotional workshops, and support at a strategic level. The overall aim of the project was to develop a peer referencing methodology which could operate effectively, not only at the institutional and partnership levels, but also at a strategic regional level, in order to meet the ‘regional needs’ of quality improvement and self-regulation.

The main project activities included initial meetings of project groupings, facilitated by LSN consultants, to develop a common approach to peer referencing and establish peer review protocols; identification and training of peer reviewers from partner organisations; a series of peer review visits conducted to at least one partner within each project group, with the review focus decided by the host provider; and feedback from the review visits and evaluation of the process by participants.

A range of staff participated in the peer referencing activities. Although some groups had restricted participation to heads of department and senior managers, in others, the reviewers were predominantly quality managers and middle managers. A wide variety of staff, students and other stakeholders had been involved within the host institutions, and in one partnership, the review feedback session had been hosted by the Student Union.

There were plans to continue the peer referencing activities for a further three months, with 10 groups of providers working in groups of four. The regional LSC were providing additional funding and consultancy time, thus demonstrating their commitment to peer referencing as a mechanism for developing quality improvement and moving towards self-regulation across the region.

A respondent actively involved in the project commented that feedback had been mainly favourable, particularly about the development of professional dialogue between partners and opportunities for sharing good practice.

Some interesting issues and challenges arose from this large and complex project. For example, one major challenge had been the logistical difficulties of brokering such a large number of diverse providers into manageable working groups. Various factors had to be taken into account and negotiated, such as a preference in some cases for working within already established partnerships, or reluctance to work with partners viewed as close competitors. Another issue was opposition from some college principals to working with institutions with lower performance gradings than their own. A third challenge faced by project participants was the relatively short timeframe allowed by project funding and the constrictions this placed on activities and outcomes which could realistically be achieved.

¹ www.fesussex.org.uk/quality/strategy.htm

² Ibid.

³ www.pdp-shropshire.org/About-PDP.aspx

⁴ Further information about Beacon status and the Beacon Innovation Fund is available at www.beaconstatus.org/opencms/opencms/www2/about/

⁵ *Emskills is a quality model which accredits best practice in meeting the training and support needs of business. It is a regional brand that employers will recognise as being the standard for excellence achieved by providers of employer related training and development.* www.emfec.co.uk/uploads/EMskills%20leaflet.pdf

⁶ *The new standard for employer responsiveness and vocational excellence will provide employers with a clear mark of quality provision that is responsive, of high quality and flexible in nature, and which will inform the development of the 'responsiveness to employers' Key Performance Indicator within the Framework for Excellence.* (QIA Improvement Strategy, 2007, www.qia.org.uk/pursuingexcellence/aims/employers_impl.html).

4 Conclusions and future developments

This exploration of peer referencing activities, being carried out by a wide range of providers across the further education system, has highlighted a number of themes, which should be considered alongside findings and conclusions from the evaluation of the national pilot project. Key points from the study are outlined below.

4.1 Collaborative relationships between new and more established partnerships

Some consortia of FE providers (e.g. Hampshire EQR, FE Sussex) have been developing a systematic form of peer referencing over a number of years. This opens up the possibility of a useful cross-fertilisation and sharing of good practice between older and newer networks of providers, which could further inform the wider dissemination of peer referencing practices across the sector. Case studies of the work of these more mature partnerships have reinforced the usefulness of peer referencing as a flexible tool which can be adapted to different purposes (e.g. full institutional, thematic or curriculum focused reviews) and which can incorporate a wide range of themes, depending on the needs of the individual organisation under review.

4.2 Formal and informal peer referencing projects

Other established consortia of colleges have been involved in less formalised peer referencing activities, and have tended to be influenced by the self-regulation agenda in their aims of developing more systematic approaches to peer referencing. Some of these partnerships were seeking support, through QIA, their local LSC or external consultants, to help them develop their peer referencing methodologies.

4.3 'Hard' and 'soft' peer referencing

Another interesting development, highlighted by the research, was the use of peer referencing to collectively develop quality improvement strategies in areas of provision where some providers appeared to feel less confident, e.g. employer responsiveness. The approach of the East Midlands Gateway Group again illustrates the flexibility of peer referencing, as there was a deliberate shift of emphasis within the peer relationship towards a 'softer' approach within this particular area of provision, with the aim of developing more rigorous judgements in the longer-term. This project, by focusing on 'gateway services' within the college environment, also demonstrated how peer referencing could be extended to include administrative and support staff as well as managers and teaching staff.

4.4 Funded project co-ordinators

Another distinctive feature of the more mature partnerships, which could contribute to a more sustainable approach to peer referencing, was the creation of a funded co-ordinator post to undertake day-to-day responsibility of peer referencing activities as well as securing additional funding as required. This approach

appeared to offer one kind of solution (at least for larger, better resourced institutions) to the problems associated with the resource-intensive nature of peer referencing work, often taken on by senior managers in a voluntary capacity.

For example, in some of the more structured and long-standing partnerships and consortia, the managers or co-ordinators played a key role in 'brokering' partnerships, arranging programmes of review visits, organising training, and facilitating training and staff development events. Although these key workers did not themselves conduct reviews, the partners relied to a large extent on their professional expertise and knowledge of how peer referencing 'works'.

4.5 Diversity of partnerships

The more recent growth in peer referencing initiatives and partnerships, including those facilitated by the QIA Support Programme, indicates an increased awareness of the benefits of peer referencing across a wider range of providers in the further education system, including those in the WBL, ACL and voluntary sectors. The diversity of these newer partnerships was also reflected in a range of features, such as whether they were regionally or nationally based; 'in-sectoral' or 'cross-sectoral'; 'partnerships of equals' (e.g. with Beacon status) or at varying levels of performance; and self-brokered or brokered through an external agency.

Like the national pilots, this diversity was balanced, to a large extent, against a commonality of approach, as reflected in the adoption of similar peer referencing methodologies and ways of working.

4.6 Confidence and trust within and between organisations

Confidence and trust in collaboration with peers was identified as a major benefit of the peer referencing process:

They know what it's really like on the ground rather than some theoretical view of how you should teach this and they really value having a colleague who is experienced in their subject coming in, looking at what they're doing and sharing with them their own experiences. What they can bring from their own college and what they can observe in the college they are visiting is good practice. I think that's what teachers value most.

Trust and confidence between partners can lay the foundations for an open dialogue, giving critical feedback and sharing sensitive information:

They have the confidence to be deliberately antagonistic to each other, and know that they can do that; and they have that degree of openness. You cannot do that unless you have a vision that you want to share.

Linked to this, the point was made there should also be a degree of confidence and trust **within** as well as **between** institutions, and that there should be clear communication with all staff about the purpose of peer reviews, to avoid misunderstandings. One respondent felt that lack of communication might lead to suspicion and fear within a reviewed department about hidden management agendas:

The other issue I can see happening as colleges are asked to set these schemes up is suspicion and fear. In the colleges where departments don't know why they're being reviewed, why have we been chosen? It must be because they want to get rid of us. There must be a senior management team agenda.

4.7 Skills and experience in peer review

As with the national pilot evaluation, another strong message which emerged from this strand of the research was the opportunities presented for effective staff development. Many respondents commented on the value of the learning experiences for those staff who had participated in peer reviews and the positive feedback they had received.

Interviews with respondents indicated a broad consensus that peer reviewing requires fairly specialised skills and experience, and a range of strategies for reviewer support and development was adopted across the research sample. One partnership engaged external advisers with HMI experience to support the review process and the training of reviewers. The role of external advisers within this scheme was viewed as vital to the success of the peer referencing process:

After every review I get an evaluation sheet back from the reviewers ... And in every single case the reviewers say the adviser on the second day was vital. 'I couldn't have managed without the adviser.' I think they could have managed but their confidence needs to be boosted.

Many of the newer partnerships too, were engaging the services of external consultants, mainly from the Learning and Skills Network, to support their peer referencing work, particularly in the initial stages. Others were drawing on support from their regional LSC.

However, other groupings were tending to draw on the experience and skills of staff from within the partnership, whether this was senior managers, quality managers or curriculum experts. One respondent, in supporting this approach, emphasised the importance of making use of practitioners with the right kind of expertise:

If you don't, then what they are not going to get out of it or put into it, is a critically evaluative approach; which is why in areas like quality, using quality managers who are trained to do that is very straightforward.

Whatever the approach adopted, the majority of respondents emphasised the importance of building in training and development tools to support reviewers. Concerns focused on the ability of some reviewers to give critical feedback in a positive way and the perception that a distinction should be made between a 'critical friend' approach on the one hand and adoption of an 'inspectorial' attitude on the other.

4.8 Collaboration and competition

As in the national pilots, some providers felt challenged by the tensions between a collaborative approach and the competitive market in the further education system. In this respect, geographical distance was raised as a critical factor during interviews. For example, the issue of potential competition and 'contestability' was linked by some respondents to geographical proximity and that this had been a factor in choosing to work with providers who were far enough away not to be direct competitors in terms of recruitment:

They could see before they began that there had to be things like confidentiality ... Also, colleges are in a competitive market and the colleges in [...] are very close to each other.

One respondent commented on the higher levels of sensitivity and competition between providers around particular areas of work, such as employer engagement, even among long established peer referencing partnerships. There appeared to be particular barriers faced by work-based learning providers in establishing the trust and openness required of peer relationships with organisations they had traditionally come to regard as business rivals.

4.9 Sustainability of peer referencing initiatives

Many respondents raised concerns about the longer-term sustainability of peer referencing initiatives. In some cases, this was linked to the capacity issues faced by some providers, particularly smaller ones, and the implications this had for their ability to participate. Others commented on the tight deadlines they faced within short-term funded projects and that insufficient time had been allowed for development work. One respondent expressed the view that short-term funding for peer referencing initiatives, although welcome, would not provide sufficient motivation for providers to make a longer-term commitment to it, and that to be effective, the process should be mainstreamed:

If they're serious about self-regulation, there should be the same emphasis placed on peer referencing as on the self-assessment report ...

Even practitioners within longer-term networks of partners expressed some concerns about their future capacity to sustain peer relationships and the risks posed by such things as decline in membership or staff changes in participating colleges. However, the more formalised structures established by these partnerships over a period of time, was likely to have contributed to their longer-term sustainability.

4.10 Further development of peer referencing work

As findings from the national pilot evaluation also indicated, many participants believed there was a useful role for external organisations, such as the QIA and LSC in supporting the further development of peer referencing work across the sector and in contributing to the sustainability of existing partnerships.

As part of its remit to the DfES for 2007-2008, QIA will develop robust, practical and effective arrangements for collective peer review and improvement to support and facilitate the move towards a self-improving and self-regulating system. In doing so, it will support a major programme of peer referencing activity that will:

- model and trial 'whole-organisational' approaches to peer referencing
- extend 'thematic' peer referencing projects across the full range of QIA programmes
- use peer referencing projects to test and develop new national performance standards
- develop the skills base for peer referencing
- assess the impact of peer referencing activity on the capacity for self-assessment and self-improvement
- identify and publish good practice in peer referencing.

Further information on how QIA is developing peer review and development to support capacity building for self-improvement and self-regulation within the FE system is available on the following QIA websites:

- [www.qia.org.uk/programmes and services/peerreview and development.html](http://www.qia.org.uk/programmes%20and%20services/peerreview%20and%20development.html)
- [www.qia.org.uk/programmes and services/support for excellence.html](http://www.qia.org.uk/programmes%20and%20services/support%20for%20excellence.html)

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