

Evaluation of the National Peer Referencing Pilots

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Executive Summary

1 Aims of the evaluation

This report presents the findings of the evaluation of the National Peer Referencing Pilots. This study was commissioned by the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) and was undertaken by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES). The evaluation was conducted between September 2006 and March 2007.

The National Peer Referencing Pilot project was a collaborative initiative developed by the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA), the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the Association of Colleges (AoC). Early in 2006 an invitation was sent out for partnerships of colleges to participate in the pilots, and eight partnerships were chosen from among these volunteers. The pilot project was restricted to FE colleges, although the longer-term aim is to extend peer referencing to other parts of the further education system.

The pilot project was set up with five primary aims:

1. To identify and assess the utility of different approaches used within the pilot studies with the aim of developing different models for peer referencing.
2. To identify the critical success factors for effective peer referencing and any contextual factors that might affect these.
3. To assess the degree to which pilot projects have accelerated improvement and the capacity for self-improvement.
4. To assess the transferability of any good practice identified within the pilot projects to other parts of the further education system.
5. To offer recommendations on how peer referencing might be used to inform further developments in self-improvement and self-regulation within the further education system.

For the purposes of the pilot project, peer referencing has been defined by the QIA as:

'Groups of providers 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.'

2 Methodological approach

The approach to the evaluation was both summative and formative. As well as identifying key outcomes from the pilots, the evaluation also took into account the developmental aspects of the project, as well as the lessons learnt and 'distance travelled' by the pilot partnerships.

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The evaluation used qualitative methods of data collection and was divided into two phases. **Phase one** (September–October 2006) involved desk-based research on peer referencing and interviews with pilot leaders and stakeholders to build a picture of the main characteristics of the pilots and emerging issues. An interim evaluation report was produced at the end of October 2006. **Phase two** (November 2006–March 2007) centred on interviews with representative groups of college staff to build up in-depth case studies of the pilots, obtain evidence about the impact of peer referencing work, and explore views on the strengths and challenges of peer referencing and the lessons learnt.

The evaluation was further informed by discussions and presentations at three workshops organised by the QIA in July and October 2006, and March 2007. The workshops, attended by college representatives and other stakeholders, were designed to share practice and review progress across the eight pilot projects.

3 Main findings of the evaluation

Summary findings and recommendations arising from the evaluation are set against the primary aims for the pilot projects as detailed above.

3.1 Approaches to peer referencing and models of practice

3.1.1 The purposes of peer referencing

Project activities carried out as part of the pilots were based on some or all of the key processes identified by the QIA as central to the peer referencing, including those linked to peer assessment (benchmarking and the validation of self-assessment judgements) and those contributing to peer supported improvement (including the sharing and transfer of good practice).

The relative importance attached to the assessment or the improvement functions of peer referencing varied between projects. This variation can be attributed to the different requirements of the colleges under review and the wider strategic aims of the partnerships. A number of projects did, however, demonstrate that peer referencing can be used to facilitate rigorous judgements on college performance *and* shared responsibilities for improvement. (See section 4.3 below).

The pilots also demonstrated that peer referencing can be used to deal with college underperformance, as well as the shortcomings of 'failing' colleges. Review visits commonly focused on areas of weakness or ways of 'moving from satisfactory to good'. At least one peer review visit was considered to have made a significant contribution to improving inspection grades in a struggling college.

The emergence of a broad consensus about the nature of peer referencing is a significant finding, and one which provides a useful baseline for the further development of peer referencing initiatives across the further education system.

3.1.2 The scope of peer referencing activity

The aspects of provision examined as part of the peer referencing process varied widely between pilot projects. For some projects the focus of attention was on the

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performance of the whole college, including its capacity for improvement. The scope of the reviews was either agreed in advance across the partnership or determined by the host college before each visit. Such 'whole organisational' models may offer useful prototypes for developing peer referencing to support self-regulation. Other projects took a more 'thematic' approach, focusing on discrete areas of college provision such as performance in particular curriculum or service areas, employer responsiveness, or the quality of leadership and management. The report also considers how a model of peer referencing can be developed for professional accreditation purposes.

3.1.3 Diversity of the partnerships

The eight pilot projects varied according to factors such as history of formation, size of group, geographical location, focus of review activity, structures of leadership and management, and levels of external funding and support. All these factors had an impact on the success of individual projects and are addressed as part of the evaluation findings. What is significant from the standpoint of the overall evaluation is finding that peer referencing can be undertaken successfully in a wide variety of contexts and settings. This is an important finding for the development of peer referencing for providers across the further education system.

3.2 Critical success factors for effective peer referencing

3.2.1 Nature of the partnerships

Some of the pilots were founded on long-established relationships between colleges; others were formed between colleges with no previous history of collaboration. The former typically found their shared history an advantage in more quickly establishing the conditions of openness and trust that supported effective peer referencing activity. The size of pilot groups was also a factor. For smaller groups (four to six in number), the logistics of peer referencing were relatively easier to manage. The larger partnerships tended to operate in smaller clusters for conducting the peer review visits.

The location of the colleges was also an influencing factor. Most of the projects were regionally based, though some were organised nationally. Both types of partnership worked effectively. There was, however, an appreciation of the trade-off between competitive pressures arising from too close a proximity to partner institutions and the logistical difficulties and additional costs associated with working at a distance.

3.2.2 Values and codes of conduct

There was a high degree of correspondence in the terms used by respondents to describe their experiences of peer referencing, emphasising, in particular, the need for openness, honesty and trust in peer relationships. Effective partnership was also considered to depend on a sense of equality and reciprocity where all partners were able to learn and benefit from each other, whatever their status. Reliability, an active commitment to the partnership and a willingness to 'sign up' to a collectively agreed approach to conducting peer reviews also emerged as key factors for success.

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3.2.3 Establishment of clear protocols and procedures

The importance of developing a shared understanding of the peer review process, particularly in the early stages of the project, was identified as a key factor in most of the projects. A number of projects had defined protocols, including memoranda of agreement, defining how peer referencing would be carried out. The exchange of relevant information and data prior to review visits was critical, given the limited duration of these visits. Guides on how to plan and manage peer referencing projects were being developed by some projects.

3.2.4 Leadership and management of projects

All the pilots were self-managed and no overarching system of leadership and management had been recommended or prescribed. A range of leadership and management styles emerged. Some were highly structured with coordinators, steering groups and operational management groups; others were based on 'looser' structures. A lack of clear definition of leadership roles and responsibilities within some of the pilots may have contributed to their slower progress.

3.2.5 Commitment of senior staff

In some of the pilots, principals and senior managers took a prominent 'hands on' role in leading and managing peer referencing activities, and this was highly valued by those participating in the projects. In other pilots, there were indications that a lack of senior management 'buy-in' had impacted negatively on project progress. Senior level support was viewed as particularly important for giving credibility to project aims, in driving forward the agenda and in linking the activity to strategic aims of the organisation.

3.2.6 Attitudes, experience and skills of reviewers

The success of peer referencing was critically dependent on the attitudes, experience and skills of review teams. There were problems reported where reviewers had taken too directive an approach or had not given feedback in a constructive way. Instances of a mismatch or uneven distribution of reviewer skills between partner colleges were also reported. Subject expertise or previous experience in inspection work was usually valued, though there was a general awareness of the need to widen the network of people who could act as reviewers. The training of staff in the generic skills of peer review was undertaken in a number of the pilot projects.

3.3 Accelerating improvement and the capacity for improvement

3.3.1 Capacity to improve

Peer referencing helped to develop a 'culture of improvement' within and across partner institutions through new ways of working. It also enhanced the capacity of participating colleges to improve through networking, peer consultancy and other collaborative initiatives. Opportunities to engage in professional dialogue with fellow peers and to participate in 'communities of practice' were seen as powerful factors in supporting improvement. Beyond peer assessment, the sharing of practice and support for the transfer of practice was seen as a critical part of the process.

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3.3.2 Accelerated improvement

The impact of peer referencing on organisational practice was evidenced through improvements in: self-assessment processes; cross institutional systems and practices; performance in specific curriculum areas; strategies for engaging learners; and impact at the individual staff level. Such developments have been cited in evidence for Ofsted inspections and annual assessment visits, and in supporting evidence for college strategies such as mergers and dealing with under-performance. Most of the pilots have agreed joint arrangements for the monitoring of action plans arising from review visits, including the impact on learners and employers.

3.3.3 Professional development of staff

The staff development opportunities offered through involvement in peer referencing activities were identified by most respondents as a key benefit of this work. Participants in the evaluation were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the advantages of learning from other practitioners and managers. The benefits to those acting as reviewers were highlighted, again reflecting the reciprocal nature of peer referencing work. While some respondents emphasised the value of staff development through 'on-the-job', experiential engagement in peer referencing activities, others spoke of the need for specific skills training for peer reviewers to ensure the rigour and credibility of peer referencing as part of moves towards self-regulation.

3.4 Sustaining and extending peer referencing activity

3.4.1 Lessons for the wider sector

The pilots have been successful in establishing a methodology for peer referencing and identifying the critical factors for carrying out this work effectively. It is anticipated that good practice in peer referencing can be applied consistently across the further education system, though forms of practice may need to vary according to context. The evaluation has confirmed that it is possible to develop a dynamic, flexible approach to peer referencing which can be adapted to meet the diverse needs and circumstances of providers from across the further education system. The pilots have also yielded documentation on protocols and procedures for planning and managing peer referencing projects which can be used to support the further development of this work.

3.4.2 Resources, funding and capacity issues

All eight projects have decided to continue their work beyond the duration of the pilots, which may reflect the expressed views of many senior staff that the benefits have outweighed the costs of this work. There were nevertheless concerns that the costs of peer referencing might be a disincentive for some providers, particularly smaller organisations, who might lack the capacity to carry out this work.

Resourcing was seen by many project participants to be a major challenge to the further development of peer referencing across the further education system. This will need to be addressed in decisions on funded support for this work, and in determining the status and role of peer referencing in relation to other external review processes, including inspection.

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3.4.3 Balancing the aims of peer referencing

A range of perspectives emerged during the pilots about the relationship between the assessment and improvement functions of peer referencing. Most project participants identified the key challenge as striking the right balance between the 'softer' and 'harder' aspects of the process and some reported difficulties, in the early stages, of getting this balance right, ie giving 'hard messages' to partners in a constructive way.

Many respondents made reference to an 'inspection-plus' factor when reflecting on the particular ethos of peer referencing, and contrasted the interactive development of professional dialogue between practitioners with external inspections, which were often perceived as more of a 'one-way process'.

3.4.4 Continuity and change in peer relationships

Another issue of 'balance' was raised in relation to the risks of partners becoming too 'cosy' and insular if their memberships remained static. In two pilots, a methodology had been adopted in which review teams were rotated at each visit in order to avoid such cosiness developing. Other pilots had plans for extending or rotating partnerships in future review cycles, but would aim to achieve a balance between continuity and change.

3.4.5 Role of national agencies

Although designed as self-managing projects, QIA had an important role in overseeing the pilots, distilling messages emerging from this work and sharing practice through review and development workshops. Other national agencies, including LSC and AoC, have made significant contributions to the pilots through representation on national and regional steering groups, brokering partnerships, and the funding of projects. There was a general consensus among project participants and stakeholders that these agencies should have a continuing role in developing, supporting and facilitating peer referencing activities across the further education system.

4 Recommendations for the further development of peer referencing

The following recommendations are addressed to policy makers, key stakeholders and college representatives involved with the design and delivery of the national peer referencing pilots, and to those with an influence on the further development of peer referencing within the further education system, including the FE Self-Regulation Implementation Group.

It is recommended that:

1. The findings of this evaluation be accepted as evidence of the utility of peer referencing in supporting the capacity of colleges to self-improve and to self-regulate their own affairs.
2. Steps be taken to embed peer referencing within the mainstream review and development activities of FE colleges and other learning providers through appropriate forms of funding and support, and through links to other external review processes.

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3. The purposes of peer referencing as developed through the pilots and articulated in QIA briefing papers, be accepted as the basis for undertaking future peer referencing work.
4. A set of core values and common protocols be developed by QIA, drawing on the critical success factors for peer referencing, to support further developments in this area of work.
5. Within a defined national framework (based on 3 and 4 above), peer referencing should be developed flexibly to meet the diverse needs and circumstances of providers from across the FE system.
6. In considering different models of peer referencing, a distinction be made between whole organisational reviews, thematic reviews on discrete aspects of provision, and reviews used for professional accreditation purposes.
7. In establishing peer referencing partnerships a variety of factors should be considered including: current or previous forms of collaboration , organisational mission and values, comparative performance, geographical location, the focus of review activity, availability of external funding and support, and optimum size of the peer referencing group.
8. Good practice in peer referencing, as developed over the course of the pilots, be consolidated by QIA into 'peer referencing toolkits' and good practice guidelines.
9. Whilst recognising the professional development function of peer review, further work be undertaken to define the skills base necessary for effective peer referencing and the national standards that might be developed to support this.
10. The findings of the evaluation should be disseminated widely to providers across the further education system in order to promote a better understanding of how peer referencing can be used to improve organisational and staff performance.
11. A new term should be adopted to more adequately reflect both the assessment and improvement functions of this work. QIA has proposed the term 'peer review and development' for this purpose.
12. The major national bodies, including QIA, LSC, Ofsted and the provider representative bodies, should work closely together to further develop the policy and practice of peer review and development as part of moves towards a more self-regulating sector.



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