

Supporting collaboration in the FE sector – lessons learnt from the Regional collaboration fund (RCF)

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May 2013



Executive summary

The following points summarise the findings of this report:

- The RCF projects finished less than two months ago, and this impact review started only a matter of weeks after the official finish date. This means that organisations had little time to launch or embed the solutions into their service provision. This review therefore focuses very much on **initial impact** and **degree of collaboration** during the project.
- The central aim of this LSIS initiative was to promote collaboration between FE organisations to achieve a common goal through the use of technology. **This was certainly achieved, with a good level of success in all ten projects.**
- Collaboration between FE organisations has the potential to deliver better / more integrated services, save money / time, develop a stronger and more united voice, and share knowledge and information. It can be considered on four levels ranging from on-going shared information networks, through temporary goal-driven alliances (either led by an individual organisation or via shared responsibility), to a fully collaborative team approach to defining the problem, identifying a solution, and working equally to create a solution. However in practice, there are a number of challenges to considering and working within a consortium of organisations, which are described in section b.
- **Most feedback from project representatives was positive.** They felt the projects succeeded in providing both intended and unintended benefits to the individuals and organisations involved, as well as benefits to the end users of the solutions/resources created. Ninety per cent of organisational representatives surveyed said they would be involved in the project if they were to do it again.
- **LSIS associates felt that all projects had achieved at least some of their intended goals**, and that most of these were of a high quality and likely to be used at least in the next academic year if not beyond. They also identified some clear unintended benefits to the collaborative working approach, mainly focused around informal information sharing.
- **The LSIS associates identified the following as enablers of collaboration:** a clear and mutually beneficial goal, committed individuals, clear facilitation and coaching/training to support the process. They identified the following barriers to collaboration: competition between organisations, individual or organisational ego, individual disinterest, and a lack of honesty regarding the capacity for the individual and organisation to participate in the project.
- **Key positive factors** that assisted collaborative relations between organisations included a previous history of working together, working in the same sub-sector, and giving each organisation specific responsibilities. Key negative factors included short timescales (anything less than an academic year), geographical dispersion, and a consortium size of more than four or five organisations.

- **In terms of defining and supporting collaboration**, there is some friction between the perhaps idealised nature of collaboration for its own intrinsic benefits (suggested by feedback from the funder and associates) and collaboration as a practical means to an end (suggested from the opinions and actions of the funded organisations). Projects were asked to specify so much at the bidding stage that they were already limited once a project began, and collaborative opportunities to create a shared voice had already been lost.
- Projects **certainly benefited from** sharing information (towards identifying the best possible solution), greater momentum (decision-making took longer but it was harder to put the project on the back burner when it is shared with others), lowering the risk (by sharing responsibility for purchase decisions) and reducing workload
- The value of the collaborative process could be increased by changing the nature of the information required at bid-writing stage, clarifying the importance of learning collaborative techniques within the ITT, and providing practical training to all organisational representatives at project start.
- Examples of topics to cover in training include:
 - The benefits and possibilities of collaborative working
 - Practical methods for running a collaborative project
 - The inclusion of a memorandum of understanding to clarify the expectations of the consortia on each organisation
 - Core project management skills
 - Identifying meaningful, practical and valid key performance indicators
 - How to deal with the politics of collaborative projects
 - How to formalise on-going collaboration after the project ends
 - How to write and promote a good end of project case study
- Based on the evidence, the most successful new collaborations are likely to occur within groups of organisations that are geographically close together, within the same FE subsector, which contain no fewer than three and no more than five consortium members, who are each given individual roles and responsibilities, and who must attend training about collaboration, collaborative techniques, conflict resolution etc.
- The central recommendation of this impact study is for funders to maximise the collaborative process by more clearly indicating the importance of learning collaborative techniques and creating new and/or deeper collaborative relationships. This must be supported by practical guidance and training. An example of a project guide, with issues to discuss as a team, is included in the ‘recommendations’ section of this report.

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Purpose of study

This report was created in response to a tender requesting an impact evaluation of the LSIS regional collaboration fund (RCF) project that ran in 2012/13. This work was carried out during April and May 2013 by Dr Tabetta Newman of Timmus Limited.

It is generally accepted that the sector is good at sharing information and at listening to what others do, whereas it is bad at implementing things that were not invented in-house. The RCF funding programme therefore aimed to foster collaborative working, which in turn would act to increase the system-wide spread and impact of technology investments across a wider number of separate organisations than most funding models that focus on providing funding at an individual organisation level.

The RCF fund consisted of ten collaborative and mainly regional projects, each worth up to £30,000. The specific purpose of the projects was to support collaboration between sector providers in the implementation and further development of technology in their activities. Each collaboration required a minimum of three providers to work together on a 'not invented here' idea. During the project lifespan each partnership was supported, guided and challenged by one of three experienced LSIS associates.

The exact purpose of this impact study was to:

- Gather evidence about the RCF project and its legacy from the project reports, the individuals involved in running the project, and from the LSIS associates that supported the projects
- Summarise the outcomes and lessons learnt during the RCF programme
- Identify models for successful collaboration in the FE sector
- Identify enablers and barriers to collaboration in the FE sector
- Recommend methods to support and develop future collaboration in the FE sector

Evidence was gathered in the following ways:

- Reading **end-of-project case studies** for all completed projects to date
- Carrying out an **online survey** of previous project leaders (n = 23 responses)
- **Interviews** and data collection via discussion with the three LSIS associates
- **Teleconferences** with four consortium representatives

Note that each project was given a code to assist tracking. This allows the project to remain anonymous in this report but traceable if required. Codes can be provided by Dr Tabetha Newman if required.

The deliverables for this project are as follows:

- This **summary report**, which used the evidence to answer the above questions about impact (see 'purpose of study' for exact nature of questions)

A word of caution

- It is important to note that these projects finished in March, and this impact review was carried out only a matter of weeks after this official finish date. This means that organisations had little time to launch or embed the solutions into their service provision. This review therefore focuses very much on **initial impact** and **collaboration** during the project.
- The timescale for this project was very short and it was therefore not possible to speak personally to a representative from every project, let alone every member organisation within each project group. Whilst the online survey collected opinions from 22 organisations within nine of the ten projects, verbal teleconferences were only possible with four representatives of the ten projects.

1. The background: what is collaboration and how can it add value?

The Regional Collaboration Fund sponsored ten projects that ran for eight months between August 2012 and March 2013.

The central aims of this initiative were to promote collaboration between FE organisations to achieve a common goal through the use of technology, with the LSIS guidance document describing the scope as follows:

Can you pool your expertise and effective practice to drive a step change in performance across a locality or across a group of providers? Bids should demonstrate how the consortium will:

- 1. Work together/have worked together to identify the common goal*
- 2. Drive towards a step change in performance through the use of technology*
- 3. Pool existing expertise and effective practice to the benefit of all, and*
- 4. Measure success*

This grant aims to provide essential core funding to enable collaborative management of these joint ventures together with an external resource in the shape of LSIS consultants to stimulate and support the management processes required to deliver success.

Whilst the initial focus was on regional collaborations (i.e. organisations working in the same geographical locality) this definition was broadened at the tender review stage to also support previously established collaborations in the Specialist College sub-sector whose individual organisations were geographically dispersed.

a. What is collaboration?

In the current economic climate collaborative working between organisations, regardless of sector, is a hot topic. Whilst sharing information has been championed across the public sector for over a decade, the move to a market-based environment and the subsequent realisation that collaboration can save money has greatly increased its attractiveness. In theory, working with other organisations can lead to:

- The delivery of new, improved or more integrated services
- Significant efficiency savings through sharing costs
- The development of a stronger, more united voice to reach out to a shared audience

- The sharing of knowledge and information

But what is collaboration? In practice it appears to occur on a number of levels, which the author has, from the evidence, chosen to define as follows:

Level 1	Shared information network, on-going arrangement Organisations share information about aspects of shared relevance, but work separately
Level 2	Single leader, goal-driven A parent organisation governs a group of subsidiary organisations to work together and achieve a common goal. The problem and the type of solution have already been identified before the project starts.
Level 3	Mutually led, goal-driven A group of organisations work jointly together, as equal partners, to achieve a common goal with a primary desire for it to benefit their organisation. The problem and the type of solution have already been identified before the project starts.
Level 4	Mutual team, solution driven Members from a number of organisations work together as a new entity to define the problem, identify possible solutions, and manage a project to implement a solution. The primary desire is to find the best possible solution for the end user (rather than the primary desire to benefit their individual organisation).

Table 1. Levels of collaboration

b. How can collaboration add value in the FE sector?

The FE sector consists of many individual organisations, each under pressure to meet the expectations of a national external regulator (Ofsted) whilst competing for access to limited funding and meeting the day-to-day responsibility for the teaching and learning hundreds if not thousands of students.

We could consider this system as, potentially, one filled with regional competitors who would prefer not to share information. In the past, organisations often opted for either a 'splendid isolation' or 'tooth and claw competition' approach. However, this proved to be of little benefit

for an organisation, the regulator, or the individual learner because it ultimately led to missed opportunities and a waste of resources.

More recently there is a growing realisation that collaborative working can be genuinely beneficial in the FE sector. Some organisations and individuals consider the sharing of information as a way to work together as equal partners to achieve mutual benefits to the end user (the learner). Others feel that collaboration leads to economies of scale and thus a competitive advantage over others. On a less idealistic note, regulators also now promote collaboration, driving some organisations to work together in order to be seen to be ticking off items on Ofsted's 'desire list'.

These drivers were also identified by the three LSIS associates who worked on the RCF projects. These individuals have extensive experience of working within FE. Each associate was freely asked to describe **what collaboration should look like** between organisations in the FE sector. They provided the following viewpoints, which all point towards collaboration at Levels 3 or 4 (Table 1):

“Collaboration is where participating organisations work together to a common goal but put ego aside in search of the best outcome for the project, partnership (or even contract) –perhaps putting the learner first, for example. This means focus, challenge, conflict, vulnerabilities, trust, openness and accountability feature strongly in the relationship for the ‘greater good’. ... to really add value, the individuals involved in a collaborative partnership need to buy in the overall goal at the expense of their individual and organisational ego.” [LSIS associate]

“Central theme is ‘we are equal partners’. We are ‘autonomous but want to share for mutual benefit’. Maybe ...in the end we are all in this to benefit learners ...not us!” [LSIS associate]

“There is a tremendous amount of duplication: providers in the same geographical area are clearly competing with one another - bidding for the same contracts, trying to attract the same target market segments [both learners and employers] and going outside of their areas of expertise to meet 'minimum contract level' requirements... Because they are working independently, they are also duplicating resources, making the same mistakes and wasting time and money as a result. These factors obviously have costs attached to them, both in terms of time and money. The benefit of sharing resources [physical, human and financial] and the expertise and experience of practitioners can be significant in improving efficiency and quality.” [LSIS associate]

Associates felt that **there were also potential benefits to collaboration between sub-sectors** in terms of bringing different strengths to the consortium:

“WBL providers, for example, tend to be far more geared up for employer focused working - being generally smaller, more flexible and more responsive in nature. They often have more personal contacts with employers too, with relationships lasting over many years - so they are trusted. On the other hand, FE colleges have the financial clout and are better resourced with a much wider portfolio of delivery. Rather than competing on every level, there is the potential to work together - with partners focusing on what they are 'good' at.” [LSIS associate]

However, collaboration within FE is not without **some significant challenges**, including:

- It is hard to find the time and money to step away from front-line services and spend time investing in collaborative projects
- It may be difficult to overcome traditional concerns about local competition for learners
- A perception may exist that each partner is unique and different, so getting them to consider the benefits of collaboration may be difficult

Even if FE organisations do decide to try collaborating, they may come up against **further challenges during the project**, notably:

- Not every organization starts with the same vision, the same levels of previous experience, or the same level of expertise
- Decision-making tends to be more complex, and therefore take lots more time than decision-making within one organisation
- One organisation's solution may not be suitable or relevant for another organisation
- The likelihood of conflicts between individual viewpoints, and/or an imbalance in commitment from the individual organisations

The rest of this report describes the success and outcomes of this funding initiative.



Collaboration between FE organisations has the potential to deliver better / more integrated services, save money / time, develop a stronger and more united voice, and share knowledge and information. It can be considered on four levels ranging from on-going shared information networks, through temporary goal-driven alliances (either led by an individual organisation or via shared responsibility), to a fully collaborative team approach to defining the problem, identifying a solution, and working equally to create a solution. However in practice, there are a number of challenges to considering and working within a consortium of organisations, which are described in section b.

2. RCF project outcomes

When reading the end-of-project reports it became clear to the author that, as with the LiT Impact Study, these documents tended to focus mainly on positive aspects of the project. So in order to collect more general feedback on the RCF project the author also carried out an online survey and spoke with people via teleconference. Results are summarised in the next section of this report.

c. Feedback from the project representatives

In order to describe the outcomes of each of the ten RCF projects, every contributing organisation within each of the ten consortia was contacted and asked to provide their feedback via an online survey.

The profile of those completing the online was as follows:

- Twenty-three individuals from 22 of the 54 organisations within nine of the ten consortia responded
- Six individuals (29%) had acted as the project leader
- Ten individuals (45%) had been the main or contributing author for the winning bid

Additional information was collected from four of the ten consortia via teleconferences with one of the key representatives.

During the online survey the RCF organisation representatives were asked whether they had worked with the other organisations within their RCF consortium previous to the RCF funding. A total of 91% of the organisations had worked with some or their entire collaborative group prior to this project (figure 1).

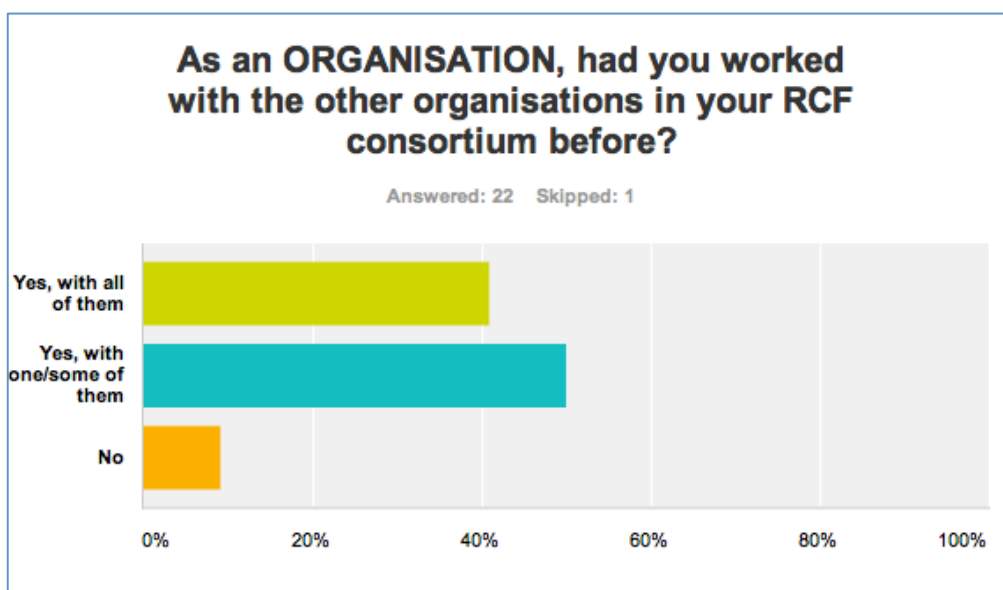


Figure 1. Bar graph from the online survey, illustrating whether organisations within an RCF project had worked with the other organisations previous to the RCF project.

On a project level, nine of the project consortia included at least two organisations that had worked together before. Some, notably the Specialist Colleges and GFE networks, had long-standing record (and in some cases embedded organisational contracts) for collaboration in terms of sharing information together. However, there were also some notable examples of new working relationships, in particular Project 8:

“The shining outcome from this project is that it really looks like this could be a lasting new collaborative arrangement. They took strength from each other and have already planned to have a rolling exhibition based around the project, which will showcase at each college during the autumn term.” [LSIS associate Project 8]

At an individual level, 77% of individuals had worked with some or all of the other individuals from other organisations previous to the RCF project (Figure 2).

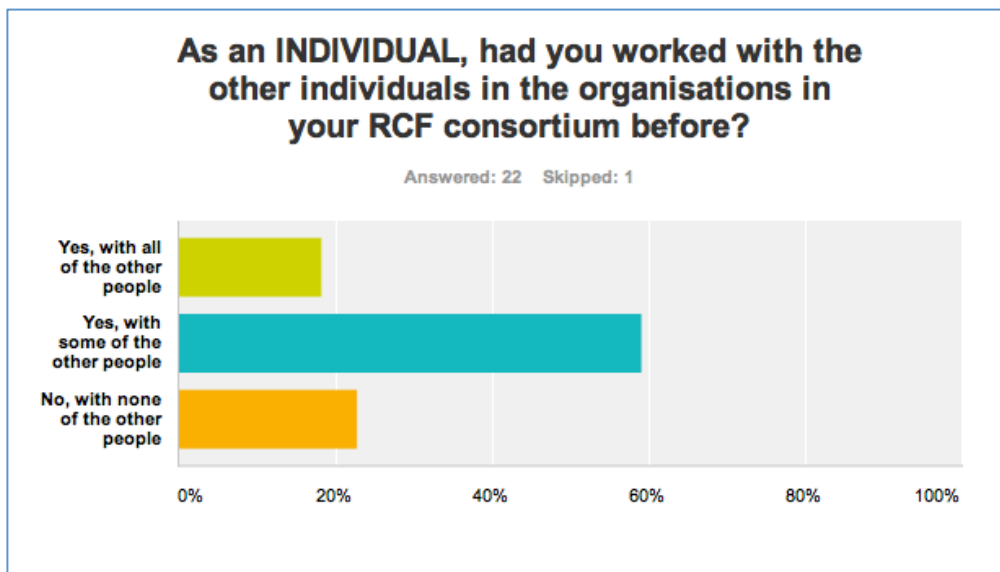


Figure 2. Bar graph from the online survey, illustrating whether individuals within an RCF project had worked with the other individuals previous to the RCF project.

The online survey aimed to gather feedback from those involved in the RCF project. First, respondents were asked whether, based on their experience on their RCF project, they felt their **organisation** would be more or less likely to collaborate in the future (Figure 3). Results were as follows:

- 62% said their organisation would be **more likely** to collaborate with **all** of the other RCF organisations involved on their project
- 75% said their organisation would be **more likely** to collaborate with **some** of the other RCF organisations involved on their project
- 67% said the RCF experience meant that their organisation would probably now be **more likely** to collaborate with **new organisations they had never met before** in the future

Overall this feedback is very positive, and suggests that the RCF experience was of value in some capacity to many of the organisations involved. It also suggests that most projects had a 'weak link' organisation who they would prefer not to work with in the future.

The project representatives were then asked about their opinion of their RCF project (figure 4). No one responded negatively, with 87% choosing to describe themselves as having a positive or very positive opinion of their project's achievements.

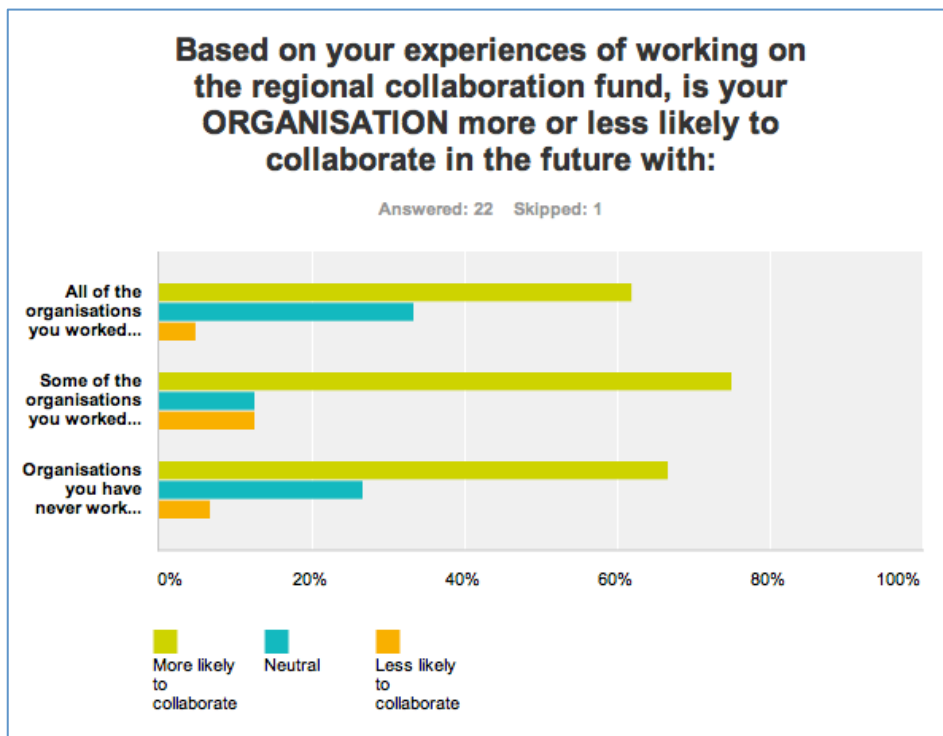


Figure 3. Bar graph from the online survey, illustrating whether the organisations within each project consortium as more or less likely to collaborate in the future.

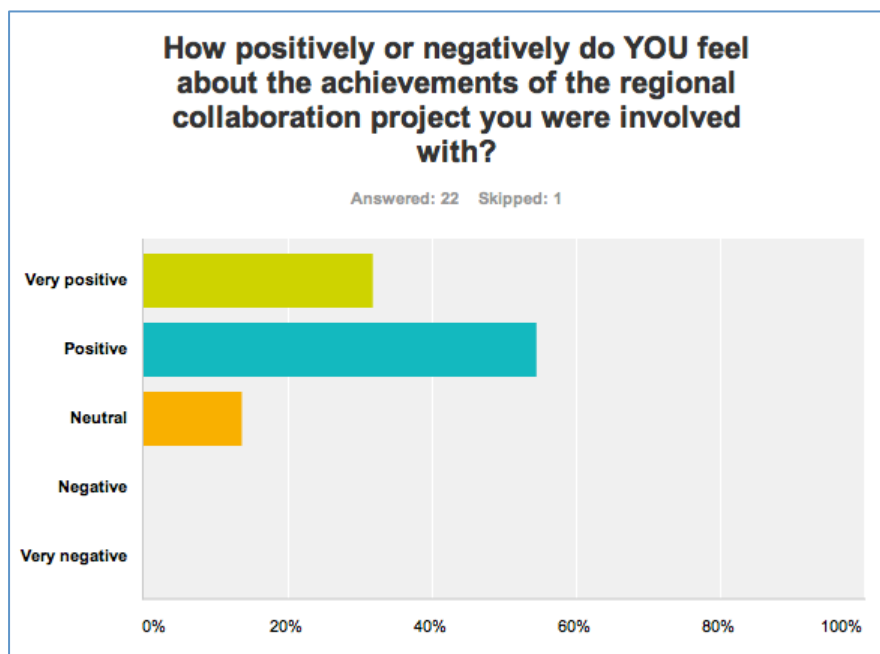
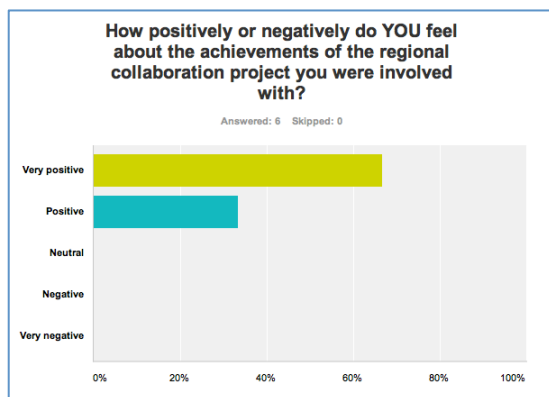
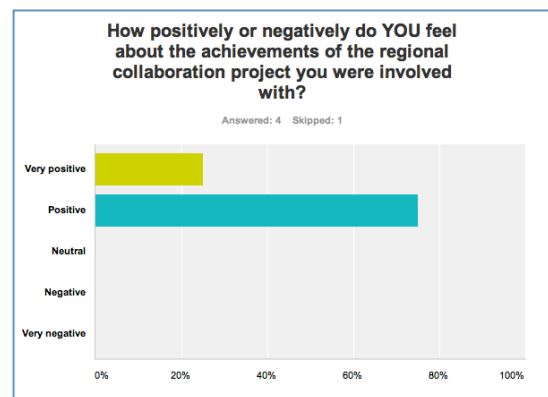


Figure 4. Bar graph from the online survey, illustrating the opinions of individuals involved in an RCF project.

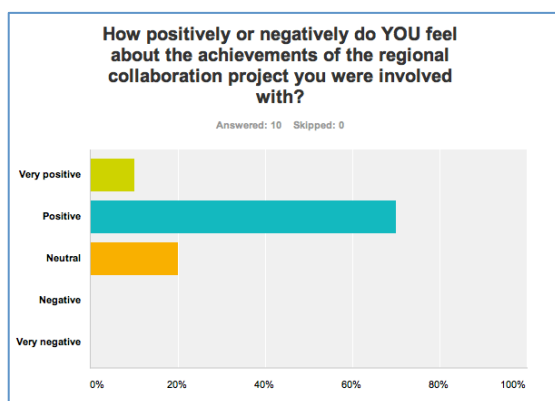
Interestingly, **personal opinions of project success were clearly different according to a person's role within the consortium.** The most positive opinions came from project leaders in the lead organisation (figure 5a), followed by those working in the lead organisation who weren't the leader (figure 5b). The lowest opinions came from non-leaders who did not come from the lead organisation (figure 5c). This suggests that, although these projects set out to be collaborative, there was more 'ownership' by lead organisations and in particular the project leader.



5a. Opinion: Project leaders.



5b. Opinion: Lead organisation, not project leader.



5c. Opinion: Other organisation, not project leader.

Positive and negative impact factors

Survey respondents were asked to identify factors they felt had the largest positive and negative impact on their RCF project. This was a free text question where they could write as much or as little as they wanted.

A total of 19 people provided information about **positive impact factors**, and the results were as follows (numbers in brackets represent the number of people who mentioned this aspect):

- Willingness for organisations to work together and share ideas and good practice (6)
- Support and information provided by the LSIS associate (5)
- Robust leadership / clear project plan which kept everyone on track (3)
- SMT / wider staff buy-in (3)
- The creation / purchase of much needed technical resources (2)
- Learner engagement and enthusiasm (1)
- All organisations coming from the same FE sub-sector (1)
- Existing relationships between partners prior to the project (1)
- Listening to other perspectives on the same problem (1)
- All organisations were based nearby geographically (1)
- Provided chance to build on from past initiatives (1)

Quotes regarding **positive factors** included:

“The opening of communication channels between technical staff in the various organisations”

“Collaboration between organisations and within my organisation”

“1. The LSIS Associate providing support throughout the project. 2. The enthusiasm to work in collaboration between Colleges who are usually in competition. 3. The expertise and willingness of XXXXX College to act as lead organisation.”

“Existing relationships between partners. Excellent support from the LSIS associate. Hard work and professionalism from [the] Project Manager. Commitment of tutors and managers at 5 providers involved. Purchase of iPads for tutors. Clear vision of what we were trying to achieve.”

“We were able to build a cohesive steering group. All organisations come from the ACL sector. All providers were located in London so able to meet face to face on a regular basis. Our LSIS Associate was very in tune with the project and gave it full commitment.”

A total of 21 people provided information about **negative impact factors**, and the results were as follows (numbers in brackets represent the number of people who mentioned this aspect):

- Time pressure / job responsibilities of the individual within their own organisation (6)
- Short timescale of RCF project (5)
- One or two weak members in the consortium (3)
- Lack of regular face-to-face meetings (2)
- Part of the proposed solution (which would have saved time and money) was not able to be created (2)
- Expectations outside of original project scope (1)
- Involving a supplier as one of the consortium members (1)
- Not enough advice about how to run a collaborative project (1)

Quotes regarding **negative impact factors** included the following:

“The 'day job' of some participants tended to get in the way of progress, really innovative suggestions would be discussed at the project group but time constraints and workload got in the way of project delivery when colleagues were back at base.”

“The duration of the project. A full academic year would have been ideal.”

“Not enough time factored into the project to obtain more evaluative feedback from users of the materials generated.”

“Having a supplier within the consortium. One weak consortium member. Not enough external advice about the political dimensions or running a project. Project Leads did not have enough time to give the project.”

“As we progressed through the project it materialized that an electronic learner/tutor signature would not be excepted. We therefore still have to print and send a paper based ILR and thus no savings in postage.”

Project legacy

During the online survey respondents were asked whether their organisation had changed for the better, and whether they as an individual had gained positive career skills or links, due to the RCF project. They were also asked whether they had learnt anything from the other members of their consortium. The results were as follows.

Organisational impact

A total of 21 respondents provided an answer to the question “*Did your organisation change for the better because of the RCF project, and if so how?*” Common themes within the answers included the following (numbers in brackets represent the number of people who mentioned this aspect):

- Access to the newly created resource / creation of a better system of working (6)
- New ideas regarding the main focus of the project (6)
- More collaborative working: colleagues within organisation more likely to collaborate on projects after their experience, or stronger / expanded collaboration networks (5)
- Useful information and new ideas on issues that were **not** the intended aim of the project - i.e. unintended positive gains (5)
- Project was expanded and continues within a single organisation (1)

Quotes regarding **organisational impact** included the following:

“Networks were expanded and other colleagues were quicker to volunteer for other collaborative projects on the back of being involved in the RCF.”

“There are new ideas about using technology to foster achieve learner engagement and achievement. Some of these are already being put in place.”

“Stakeholders are more willing to accept video conferencing instead of travelling.”

“Our teachers' toolkit is revamped and updated and now hosted in a county wide area where it should be easier for collaboration to continue.”

“We worked with other colleges and representatives who we wouldn't normally have worked with. Governors are considering new ways to access resources and communicate with one another. Governors also have a better understanding of the technology used by young people in order to inform and shape their strategic decisions.”

“Jisc RSCs deliver an advisory service. We are in a very much better position now to advise providers on how to get the best from electronic ILPs.”

“We tried eLLP for some of our courses and examined possibility of putting it in the Service’s strategic plan for other courses.”

“We now do much more things with video conferencing than before.”

“It was a good experience to be part of this project and helped to build on our relationship with the regional alliance.”

“The impact is ongoing, the RCF funding was used to develop coding for the my CPD hub... these products are now being disseminated to the other partner colleges and will be trialed and tested over the next few months. The LSIS funding enabled several colleges to work together on a specific piece of work that would have been unlikely to happen otherwise.”

As can be seen from the example quotes above, one of the most frequently mentioned ‘unintentional benefits’ of the projects was the experience and subsequent uptake of **video conferencing** as a useful method of communication (mentioned by three people, i.e. 14% of those who responded).

Three people (14%) said that their organisation hadn’t been positively affected, with one concluding:

“No, I don’t believe this project had any impact on our organisation, from a personal level nothing was learnt, however we did support other colleges.”

The project, and the face-to-face meetings, also provided an opportunity for a lot of informal information sharing regarding best practice outside of the project, which are very likely to have been useful in their own right:

Whilst our project was definitely to do with collaboration around a practical and functional aim the staff members involved learnt things about good practice in other colleges that they didn’t know about – even through we regularly work together as a regional consortium of colleges. [Project 5 representative]

Individual impact

A total of 19 respondents provided an answer to the question “Have you as an individual gained positive skills/links relevant to your career because of the RCF project, and if so how?” Common themes within the answers included the following (numbers in brackets represent the number of people who mentioned this aspect):

- Expanded knowledge base regarding ways of working (4)
- Expanded list of useful people to contact in the future (4)

- Expanded knowledge base regarding technologies (software/hardware) (4)
- Better understanding of how to bid for and win tenders (3)
- Better project management / report writing skills (1)
- Better understanding of staff needs (1)

Quotes regarding **individual impact** included the following:

“Gained experience in using some really useful iPad aps which I have shared with others within my organisation.”

“Personally I was new to FE when I wrote the tender document and the delivery has very quickly increased my knowledge base and contacts.”

“Negotiation, planning and bid writing skills. The partnerships will have created networking opportunities which will be developed.”

Increased knowledge of video conferencing systems.”

“Gained a greater understanding of monitoring a collaborative project. Skills will help inform in a future monitoring and projects.”

“Greater understanding of the resource requirements of teaching staff.”

Three people (16%) freely mentioned that they now had better understanding and experience of video conferencing due to the RCF project.

Three people (16%) said that they had not learnt anything personally.

Respondents were then asked whether, based on their personal experience of the RCF project, they would go through the experience personally again. A total of 90% of survey respondents said yes (figure 6).

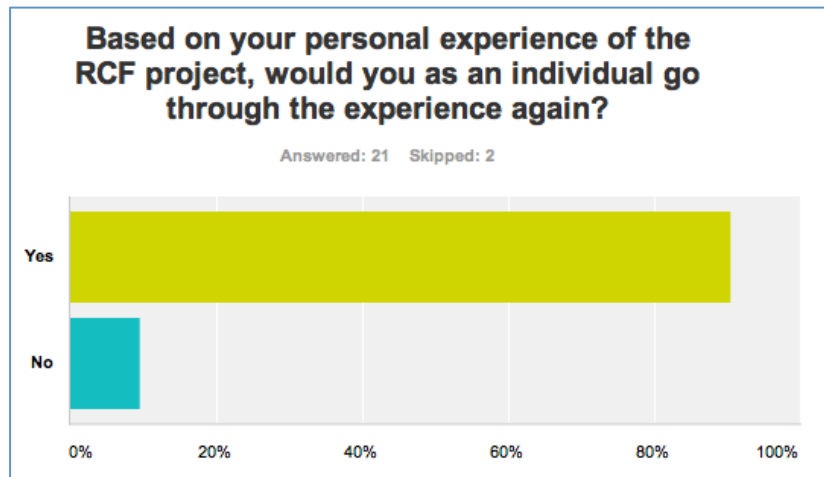


Figure 6. Bar graph from the online survey, illustrating whether the individuals involved would go through the RCF project experience again.

Learning from other organisations

A total of 16 respondents provided an answer to the question *“Did you learn anything from the other members of the consortium, and if so what?”* Common themes within the answers included the following (numbers in brackets represent the number of people who mentioned this aspect):

- Learn about other approaches / ways of dealing with common issues (7)
- Learnt about good practice in other organisations (3)
- Share the experience with others (3)
- Created new ways of working collaboratively together (1)

Quotes regarding **learning from other organisations** included the following:

“Yes - the “pool” of technical knowledge was vast and not only were we able to select an appropriate technology for the project, we were also able to bounce completely unrelated ideas around.”

“An better appreciation of the variety of approaches used by similar organisations to address common problems.”

“Different approaches to quality assurance use of Moodle, access to resources (e.g. Xerte, SurveyMonkey) that we do not currently have.”

The special case of Specialist Colleges

Two projects made up of Specialist Colleges were included in the ten RCF consortia. They have a long and strong history of collaboration in terms of sharing information as an on-going arrangement (Level 1 in the Table 1). However, despite their track record of collaboration, when it came to the collaborative aspects of this project they did not reach the higher levels of collaboration that were seen in other groups. Indeed they tended to benefit most from collaboration at the start (sharing information and identifying a solution), but then working in parallel from that point onwards.

This could be seen as these consortia achieving less in terms of collaboration than others. However, after closer investigation by the author this perception is unfair. It is easy to see Specialist Colleges, like the other sectors (ACL, GFE etc) as catering for a similar group of learners. In fact this is far from the case. Unlike every other subsector these Specialist Colleges often specialise in different types of special needs adult learners – whilst one college may support blind learners, another might support those with profound learning difficulties. For these colleges then, collaboration tends to be at a far more practical level outside of exact methods of teaching and learning. They may identify a common need, but integration and use at an organisational level is always very different due to the nature of their learners.

“Our day to day work with learners differs massively between each Specialist College. For me, collaboration was about meeting other technical teams to discuss our set-ups and issues, and to share ideas and bounce them around. Shared services at a teaching level are often not going to be as relevant to our colleges as sharing information about infrastructure.... If the focus was to shift our project to collaboration between colleges then it would have been helpful for our project team to include senior management or teaching staff instead of only admin’ and technical staff.” [Project 9 representative]

This information suggests that, if the focus was on engaging deeper collaboration rather than goal resolution, project bids from Specialist Colleges should focus on areas where shared service is possible. Alternatively the funder may need to consider a more pragmatic approach to collaboration in Specialist Colleges.



Overall the projects succeeded in producing both some intended and unintended benefits to individuals and organisations involved, as well as for the ultimate end users of the solutions/resources created. Ninety per cent of those surveyed said they would be involved in the project if they were to do it again.

d. Opinions of the RCF project from the LSIS associates

Feedback from the LSIS associates who worked on the projects suggests that all of the ten projects produced resources and outputs with the capability to be genuinely useful in practice, for example one associate commented as follows on a project.

“They built the website, which functions well, looks pretty good and has all the intended features... I was concerned about the quality level of the resources being produced... Getting the partners to QA resources at least made this a more inclusive and less judgmental process ... I don't know yet [it's too early to say] how effective this site will be, but it has real potential.” [LSIS associate, Project 8]

When asked whether the projects were likely to have sustained positive impact for at least a year after the funding period the LSIS associates felt that the majority of organisations that joined the collaborations would continue to see some benefits, although this is largely dependent on organisation-level change and national-level funding/pressure:

“Due to technology being the core of these projects - and the time it takes to embed - and then be used - and then get feedback - and then have an effect, it is too early to say. I would hope that all of them would have a lasting legacy in one shape or another. I think that much will depend on funding [they won't run on thin air]; key staff staying in post; and policy focus not changing too soon.” [LSIS associate]

One associate mentioned that organisations (especially those in ACL or WBL) often benefit greatly from the attention and interest of a funder who nurtures rather than demands:

“I found it fascinating to see the diversity of the sector and the good-heartedness that is still there despite the cuts. People are genuinely passionate about making a difference to people's lives. I was especially impressed by the smaller ACL providers [in project 4]. ... I think that people in the sector ...including all the admin workers... don't get praised often from funders and agencies. It was a small contribution ...but I think people felt their contribution was ...even for a short time ...recognized and appreciated by someone outside their organisation.” [LSIS associate]

Enablers

The LSIS associates were asked to name the conditions that **facilitate successful collaborative projects**. Their responses were as follows:

Associate 1

“There have to be clearly visible and tangible benefits for all parties concerned - and the funding to support it - otherwise forget it! Then the desirables ...

A shared vision, shared needs, shared willpower/motivation to succeed, shared ownership/responsibility/accountability“

Associate 2:

“There needs to be a clear and mutually beneficial goal

A desire to define and learn about what collaboration means in reality; and how shared leadership can work

Individual care and aspiration about being the best they can be

A positive culture of participating organisations based on minimizing political influences and understanding how true collaboration ultimately delivers the best results; although possibly in the longer-term

Carefully staged mandatory interventions such as professional dialogue skills training, linked to project management; and 1-1 coaching”

Associate 3:

“The project engages the participants at an emotional level and isn’t just another item on their ‘to do’ list

It might be that it offers a level of intellectual challenge that appeals, or be part of core business

People need to bond personally ... and part of that is speaking the same language. If the parties are too diverse it doesn’t help.

People need to be clear about who is providing technical input and advice ... and who are the responsible partners. Project 3 and Project 4 brought in a consultant / developer for specific input, and they were brilliant! But their role was clear- they were suppliers but not part of the core project team.”

Barriers

The associates were asked to name the conditions that **hinder collaborative projects**. Their responses were as follows:

Associate 1

“The opposite of my suggestions for enablers plus fear of competition. I am working with a provider at the moment [WBL] who shared their resources, and started working with a local college. The college took everything [including the resources] and shared nothing

in return! The provider refuses to work with the college any more - even though she is going to lose money as a result!"

Associate 2

"Individual and organizational ego

A professional laziness and lack of will to engage

A lack of recognition from participants that the environment is changing around them and that there is need for them to review their working practice and ethos"

Associate 3

"I think some people in colleges have not recognised the changed times. They are used to working in organisations where there is slack and they can engage in 'peripheral' projects... so some may have engaged with the project without recognising the pressures they would face later in the year.

To some extent folks need to be more honest with themselves about their capacity and what is really a priority. Of course ... people can always find the time and energy if they are personally engaged by something. They are also willing to travel large distances at inconvenient times ...or Skype in. The barrier is not simply about personal resource ...it's about commitment too."

Unintended benefits

LSIS associates were also asked whether there had been any **unintended benefits** to organisations during the projects. Many of these have been mentioned by the projects themselves in the previous section, notably the increased use of video conferencing to share information and increased learning and engagement by students and staff.

Other unintended benefits as identified by the associates included:

- Important new relationships that grew from the projects and which are likely to continue, such as those between the clerks to the Governors (Project 2), and new organisational-level relationships (Project 7)

"Two of the Colleges (and the Directors involved) did seem to strike up a new and productive relationship."

- The likelihood that further sharing of project outcomes will/may occur outside of the original project consortium

“It is hoped that some of these project consortia will reach outside of their group to disseminate their findings more widely. This is particularly true of the GFE colleges within a region.”

“Project 2 has a superb basis for wider buy-in of other colleges into the created portal (but I am not sure if this potential will be exploited).”

“In Project 9 new relationships at grass-roots level did appear to grow and I think a legacy of working together may well continue.”

- Improved learning outcomes for students

An interesting [unintended] outcome of this project was that the learners felt that the greatest benefit to them of creating these resources was that they had learned their subjects better! As they were producing material to be published on-line, they wanted to make sure it was right, so checked and double-checked etc etc supported by their tutors ... reinforced learning! A number of staff also learned a lot! [LSIS associate Project 1]

- A better understanding of learner / staff needs



LSIS associates felt that all projects had achieved at least some of their intended goals, and that most of these were of a high quality and likely to be used at least in the next academic year if not beyond. They also identified some clear unintended benefits to the collaborative working approach.

The associates identified the following as enablers of collaboration: a clear and mutually beneficial goal, committed individuals, clear facilitation and ideally coaching/training to support the process. They identified the following barriers to collaboration: competition between organisations, individual or organisational ego, professional disinterest, and a lack of honesty regarding the capacity for the individual and organisation to participate in the project.

e. A summary of project success

This section of the report focuses on summarising the overall success of the ten RCF projects. Success has been described on three scales:

- How well each project consortium achieved the **aims set out in the initial LSIS ITT**
- How well each project consortium achieved its **intended goals**

- How well the organisations in each project consortium **collaborated together**

Each project is summarised in the table overleaf in terms of these three measures of success. Judgement on each was based on information provided from the LSIS associates, the end of project reports, and the online survey completed by project representatives.

From the evidence it appears that **very few of the projects created metrics** for, or measured success. Such 'key performance indicators' (KPIs) are now considered important by funders and regulatory bodies and can add great value if used correctly – particularly if a baseline metric is taken at project start and compared at the end (e.g. student opinion via a survey, measured before and after an event). Whilst most projects failed to mention KPIs in any associated documents, it is also important to note that the **LSIS end-of-project reports failed to specifically ask about KPIs**, which was an omission that should be avoided in the future. That said, great care should be taken when choosing KPIs in terms of identifying meaningful, practical and valid measures.

It is of interest to note that for these RSC projects, gauging success was far harder than identifying successful Leadership in Technology (LiT) projects, with opinions gathered from reports, individual representatives, LSIS associates and the online survey often varying greatly within a single project. Added to this, most consortium members focussed on success in terms of their **outputs**, whereas the focus of LSIS associates was much more firmly associated with the **degree and quality of collaboration**.

Table summarising the relative success of each Regional Collaborative Fund project consortia

Key for the summary table

MEETING THE LSIS REMIT

There were four steps involved in meeting the LSIS remit, as follows:

1. Work together/have worked together to identify the common goal
2. Drive towards a step change in performance through the use of technology
3. Pool existing expertise and effective practice to the benefit of all, and
4. Measure success

INTENDED GOAL SUCCESS

High = Achieved their intended aims and more, and continued use of deliverable after project end is likely.

Medium = Achieved most of their intended aims and/or other aims that were of value, and continued use of deliverable after project end is likely.

Low = Didn't achieve their intended aims, and/or continued use of deliverable after project end is unlikely.

COLLABORATION SUCCESS (as per table 1)

Level 1 = Shared information network, on-going arrangement

Level 2 = Single leader, goal-driven

Level 3 = Mutually led, goal-driven

Level 4 = Mutual team, solution driven

Table summarising the relative success of each Regional Collaborative Fund project consortia

Project No.	Goal of project	Did they achieve the four aims of LSIS ITT?	Level of intended goal success	Level of collaboration success
1 (GFE)	Engaging learners in General FE College setting by asking a subset of learners to create resources on one aspect of their subject, so galvanising more creative use of ILT by learners and teachers. Original consortium had plans to work across all 14 colleges in the region. In practice only three were involved in the project, one was new and included last minute after matchmaking by LSIS. Project went very well – they overachieved in terms of the original targets, and one student produced an app that lecturers want to use. Survey feedback (from two people) was quite positive.	Achieved 1, 2 and 3. Identified some key performance indicators for Step 4 but cannot collect until the end of the academic year.	High	Level 3
2 (GFE)	Improve communication and sharing of best practice and information between General FE College Governors within their college and between colleges in the region. Bid started and ended with three colleges, with ultimate aim to share across all nine in the region. Survey feedback (from one person) was positive.	Achieved 1, 2 and 3. Didn't create a metric to measure success.	High	Level 3
3 (GFE)	To explore possible solutions to improve tracking of learner progress, which was identified by Ofsted and internal QA as a weakness across all of the four general FE colleges involved. All colleges listed on the bid finished the project that involved implementing Moodle Gradebooks in a variety of ways to address the need. Survey feedback (from three people) varied from neutral to quite positive.	Achieved 1, 2 and 3. Didn't create a metric to measure success.	High	Level 4
4 (ACL)	A consortium of five regional dispersed providers who had been advised, following Ofsted inspection, to create a more systematic approach to data collection and management. One part of project scope – to avoid postage costs of sending ILRs by using electronic versions – couldn't be included as this was not permissible by the awarding bodies. This was a blow to some providers. All five providers were involved throughout the project. Survey feedback (from one person) was quite positive.	Achieved 1, 2 and 3. Didn't create a metric to measure success.	High	Level 4

5 (GFE)	To drive the improvement of teaching and learning via peer observations in CPD, to reduce paper-based CPD systems for tracking, and provide a central and individual CPD 'dashboard' for every member of staff. Five general FE and one land-based FE College were listed on the original bid. In practice three ran and finished the project, the others contributed in a minor capacity. These three colleges have a track record of collaborative working and worked well together. Survey feedback (from three people) was negative to neutral.	Achieved 1, 2 and 3. Didn't create a metric to measure success.	Medium	Level 4
6 (ACL)	To bring together a regional consortium of Adult Community Learning providers to explore the use of technology to engage and support adult learners, with the focus on using electronic individual learning platforms (eILPs). The initial bid saw five ACL providers working with a RSC and a commercial provider of IT resources and support services. Initially they also planned to devise a way to integrate eILPs into their individual MI systems. This part of the project was dropped. Otherwise project went well and the collaborative element was highly successful, e.g. with the group creating a forum for discussing collaborative leadership styles, info' about PRINCE2 etc. They learnt a lot as a group – project management skills, successful team building, commissioning training from external providers and requirements for monitoring, review and reporting. They are working together outside of the project – running a survey and an exhibition. Survey feedback (from four people) was neutral to positive.	Achieved 1, 2 and 3. Didn't create a metric to measure success.	Medium	Level 4
7 (FE + WBL)	To develop innovative methods of supporting the delivery of functional skills within the workplace as part of an embedded apprenticeship provision. The project aimed to support the development of sustainable resources, stimulate the sharing of best practice and expertise, and improve and enhance learner experience and outcomes. Eleven organisations (a mix including general FE colleges, WBL providers and a RSC) were listed on the original bid, of which seven worked in detail the project and the four others contributed in a minor capacity. No survey replies.	Achieved 1, 2 and 3. Didn't create a metric to measure success.	Medium	Level 2
8 (SPECIALIST COLLEGE)	To produce a web-based resource hub for colleges working with adult learners with a range of learning difficulties. The bid and project involved four Independent FE Specialist Colleges. These specialist colleges have a track record of sharing and contacting one another, despite being geographically dispersed, due to the relative rarity of their service	Achieved 2 and 3. Step 1 was achieved by one college before project bid. Didn't create a metric to	Medium/High	Level 2

	provision. Survey feedback (from two people) was positive.	measure success.		
9 (SPECIALIST COLLEGE)	Creating a video conferencing facility in each college, with the aim of using this to bring key individuals together virtually for regular learner review sessions. Ideally they hoped to include social workers and transitions advisers in this new method of communication. They aimed to create a 'best practice' standard of using video conferencing in transition activity and curriculum activities. Six colleges bid for and completed the project. These specialist colleges have a track record of sharing and contacting one another, despite being geographically dispersed, due to the relative rarity of their service provision. Survey feedback (from four people) was positive.	Achieved 1 and 2. Partially achieved Step 3 although tended to work alongside one another separately, rather than pooling expertise. Didn't create a metric to measure success.	Medium/High	Level 2
10 (MIX)	To share expertise and complementary skills between three Colleges and two sector organisations, and to draw on the expertise of a commercial organisation and create a platform and sample resources targeted at adult learners to promote entrepreneurship that could be both purchased and accessed online. An online store was created that enabled a back end learning platform to be integrated with the front-end sales and merchandising framework. The technology solution on ILT and merchandising was integrated into an effective curriculum and learner management model to ensure the integrity and probity of the sales. In practice PayPal were less engaged than was hoped, but the platform worked well and collaboration between some of the partners was strong. All organisations finished the project. Survey feedback (from four people) was positive.	Achieved 1, 2 and 3. Didn't create a metric to measure success.	Medium	Level 3

3. Factors influencing collaboration

f. Positive effects

From the evidence base it appears that the following factors had a **positive effect** on collaboration within a project:

- **Collaboration with organisations and/or individuals who have a previous track record of working together**

“Other providers considering similar projects should consider building the collaboration from previously established relationships as this facilitates smoother working relationships and trust.” [Project 1]

“This set up meant that the key personnel already knew each other and could quickly assign lead tasks to those according to their strengths and weaknesses. The regional college organisation meetings were already set up and in the college calendars, which meant, whilst there were extra project meetings for consortium members, it was easy to keep the project as an agenda item for wider feedback from the contributing organisations.” [Project 5]

- **Working as a team from the same sub-sector:**

“I think particularly for Project 6 and Project 8 projects, it was important. Specialist Colleges, ACL and WBL definitely see themselves as 'different' and having unique challenges. They are usually bottom of the list when it comes to reform or developments in the FE sector, so tend to have a defensive group mentality, I would say. Consequently, working together with like-minded people from the same organisation type gives them confidence through shared experience and a sense of feeling understood.” [LSIS associate]

“In Project 2, their being from the same sub-sector (GFE) gave the partnership a clear and mutually beneficial goal so there was a keen desire to achieve the outcome.” [LSIS associate]

- **Ensuring each organisation had their own jobs and responsibilities within the consortium**

“The project’s LSIS Associate flagged up the importance of working towards a sustainable collaborative partnership. To support this, it was felt it would be useful to allocate specific responsibilities to members of the Steering Group to both share some

of the project management workload and develop these areas further for the project.”
[Project 6]

- Bringing **private companies** in to assist the project, so long as they were **not** part of the core consortium

“The freedom to engage private developers etc.. bought essential expertise and guidance to the projects where appropriate” [LSIS associate]

- **Allowing flexibility** in the exact nature of the project’s deliverable, particularly when the focus is on technological solutions that need to sit within a range of different IT systems already in place in organisations. Collaboration need not mean a one-solution fits all approach, as was seen in with the GFE consortium in project 5:

Interestingly, this doesn't mean that they all end up with exactly the same product, but variations of the same technology that fit with their own existing systems and achieve the same results. [LSIS associate, Project 5]

- **Ensuring Project Leads also attend any practitioner training** (particularly in ACL)

“Project Leads felt that hands-on training would give providers most sustainability, i.e. acquiring the skills for their organisations rather than commissioning a third party to create materials. Although the initial project training focus was on practitioners, it was felt important that Project Leads should also attend face-to-face training. This was on the basis that Part-time practitioners are generally less permanent members of staff and there was concern that the organisations could easily lose their skills/knowledge.
[Project 6]

- **Working with an external LSIS associate**, who provide coaching and facilitatory skills (although there can be some initial suspicion of working with a representative of the funding body)
- **Having to become familiar with technologies to assist collaboration**, notably video conferencing
- **Within-organisation support** (both at SMT and practitioner level, and including anyone likely to be affected by the project)

g. Negative effect

From the evidence base it appears that the following factors had a **negative effect** on collaboration within a project:

- The **short timescale** of the project was one of the largest negative effects, caused by the mismatch between the business year used by the funder, and the academic year used by all funded organisations. The projects only ran for 8 months, which was a very short time in which to embed new ways of working. In particular this had impact on how well the projects were sometimes accepted within an organisation:

“Timing emerged as an important consideration during the project. Learners are more likely to accept eLLPs if these are introduced at the beginning of a course rather than part way through.” [Project 6]

- **If the organisations were geographically dispersed.** Note that eight of the ten projects focused on regional groups. Two projects supported geographically dispersed organisations because they had a particular speciality and a strong case for requiring funding to create a new resource to be used across their sub-sector. However, they had a different method of collaborating and it was hard for them to embrace a new way of considering this process. They also found it tricky to meet regularly in formal and informal ways.

“Project 8 included organisations that are spread all over the country, so only had one f2f meeting, which I think was a slight problem - although they had regular Skype meetings.” [LSIS associate]

“Collaborative working was a tough thing for some people to get their head around, shared ownership and sustainability was hard, especially for the specialist colleges who were so geographically isolated. They only had one consortium face to face meeting.” [LSIS associate]

“The ones that worked best were in the same region -- there was only so much money in the budgets for travel anyway. Emails and Skype are fine... but folks do need to meet occasionally.” [LSIS associate]

- **Including more than approx. five organisations within a single consortium**, as this tends to slow the process down and individual responsibility is removed.
- **Projects that bridged different FE sub-sectors:**

“With Project 10 there was a lack of engagement from some of the parties...perhaps because this was the largest and most diverse consortium I worked with.” [LSIS associate]

- **Not being given a specific job role and responsibility:**

“The tasks each partner is given need to be substantial and clearly of value. Just providing feedback or reviewing something seems to be regarded as a bit second level. Folks need to make something / test it / report specifically on it... be accountable for important missions.” [LSIS associate]

- **Including commercial suppliers within the core consortium** (they tend to have commercial interests at heart and are therefore prone to steering towards certain solutions). This was an initial issue for Project 6:

“In our case the commercial organisation was key to forming the project and the start – we may not have come together without them because we had never worked together before. However, conflicts of interest occurred that made it impossible to continue as we began. It would have really helped to have some advice and support for such political aspects of projects.” [Project 6 representative]

- **Technology**, where it becomes easier to focus on technical aspects of the project at the expense of working collaboratively. This was probably the case for Project 9.

h. No effect

From the evidence base it appears that the following factors had **no apparent effect** on successful collaboration within a project:

- Organisation size (all LSIS associates felt this made no difference)
- Whether the project focussed on teaching and learning or leadership and management (all LSIS associates felt this made no difference)



Key positive factors that assisted collaborative relations between organisations included a previous history of working together, working in the same sub-sector, and giving each organisation specific responsibilities. Key negative factors included short timescales (anything less than an academic year), geographical dispersion, and a consortium size of more than four or five organisations.

4. The mechanics of collaboration – a reality check

In the first section of this report the author identified four levels of collaboration, which is duplicated below for ease of reference.

Level 1	Shared information network, on-going arrangement Organisations share information about aspects of shared relevance, but work separately
Level 2	Single leader, goal-driven A parent organisation governs a group of subsidiary organisations to work together and achieve a common goal. The problem and the type of solution have already been identified before the project starts.
Level 3	Mutually led, goal-driven A group of organisations work jointly together, as equal partners, to achieve a common goal with a primary desire for it to benefit their organisation. The problem and the type of solution have already been identified before the project starts.
Level 4	Mutual team, solution driven Members from a number of organisations work together as a new entity to define the problem, identify possible solutions, and manage a project to implement a solution. The primary desire is to find the best possible solution for the end user (rather than the primary desire to benefit their individual organisation).

Table 1. Levels of collaboration

i. Is there a desire for collaboration in FE, and if so at which level?

Many of these projects contained FE organisations with previous collaborative links:

“Many projects are formed of organisations that are themselves part of wider established regional consortiums. They’ll keep collaborating and have organisational-level agreements in place to ensure it.” [LSIS associate]

However, in most cases previous collaboration was very much as per Level 1 above – they were part of a shared information network but hadn't considered deeper methods of collaboration.

The LSIS associates were asked whether the RCF projects illustrated a desire for deeper collaboration in the FE sector. The associates were generally disappointed in the collaborative interactions during most RCF projects. Most projects were focussed on achieving a goal together (Level 2 or 3 in Table 1) rather than being aware and valuing the potentials of a full collaborative experience (Level 4 in Table 1):

“I just don't think there is an appetite in the sector to be really ambitious in relationships, whether challenging the status quo of existing ones, or in the new. There is just too much emphasis on being market-driven and the closing circle of a return to unbridled competitiveness. There are flashes of aspiration and even collaborative action which is rewarding to see; but most individuals in the sector just don't see it or don't get it i.e. don't see the benefits. If they do see it, other sector influences affect participation. It's very often symptomatic of their own organisational culture and also a reflection on their personal way of working. Unfortunately organisation and personal ego are extremely difficult things to challenge, let alone change over a short period...” [LSIS associate]

Full collaboration (Level 4) would have required the organisations and individuals to buy into the goal, not define the solution before collaborative discussion, and work outside of their comfort zones. It also required a strong leader who was also able to put aside personal goals and opinions. This rarely happened in practice:

“To really add value, the individuals involved in a collaborative partnership need to buy in the overall goal at the expense of their individual and organisational ego. In some RCF projects there was a reluctance to even agree terms of reference, which was frankly quite embarrassing ... [There was] too much emphasis on politics, insufficient experience at working across organisations (too sub-sector focused); poor leadership experience and styles of individuals. Clear agreement on leadership is essential and again was under-valued in the main. Generally, they simply wanted to get on with the task, do what they each had to do and get something out of it. The exception was Project 2 who whilst wishing to work to a tight mandate and keep LSIS at arms length at first (i.e. keep the funder at bay, they might interfere)... were remarkably open in their discussions, to their credit and the relationships built benefited from this.” [LSIS associate]

“In the main collaboration was at an individual level and this varied in depth – mostly superficial. Some examples of deeper relationships forming, mostly evidenced by conversation outside regular meetings etc... Open-mindedness is not a phrase I would use to describe the majority but nevertheless there are some who genuinely hold that value and follow it. On occasion, politics and inexperience held these people back from really getting to grips with collaborative effort, when the most rewarding action they could have taken was to take it by the scruff of the neck. Often this was because they are frightened of conflict and its outcomes ... Some projects just didn't want to become involved in the collaborative side of the project; feeling that they did it already...said it all for me.” [LSIS associate]

Where deeper collaborations were witnessed they appeared to be very much associated with individual rather than organisational relationships:

“In Project 3 the folks gelled and bonded. If the individuals move on I doubt the same dynamic can be easily replicated -- people need to battle with issues collectively to bond. Someone else joining has to ‘earn their spurs’ in a way. So if the problem was addressed and a resolution found... the individuals will keep in touch. There aren’t organisational level agreements in place to guarantee collaboration for the Project 3 organisations in the future.” [LSIS associate]

The importance of identifying individual ‘gatekeepers’ was one of the key findings of the Leadership in Technology Impact Study, with a recommendation to identify and involve all key individuals who are affected by a project, and to focus effort on identifying a project leader who is both strong and able to put ego aside to guide, facilitate, identify and engage the other individuals in a common cause:

*“Part of ‘engaging’ people is that folks need to see that they are making a **valued contribution** to a **shared endeavor** that is also **personally relevant**.” [LSIS associate]*

However these skills are, in the author’s opinion, seriously underestimated in all sectors. This is not the fault of the individuals who find themselves leading a project such as a RCF consortium. They very often need to be taught the skills to guide, lead and facilitate the group through a difficult project – one that spans not only within-organisation issues but also those between organisations.

Finally, if RCF projects are to be judged against an ideal of Level 4 collaboration (Table 1), they are likely to fall short not because of them, but because of the nature of the initial ITT and bidding process. During bidding they had already been asked to identify a lead individual and lead organisation, to specify the project objectives, and to describe how they would carry out and jointly manage the project. This already puts them in a position where much of the collaborative work should have been achieved at the bidding stage, without the assistance of any coaching in the scope and techniques of collaboration. With this constraint so early on, it was unlikely that they could maximize the possibilities of collaborative working.

A better process would have been to ask for the following at the bid stage:

- Identify a common problem
- Identify a lead individual without necessarily specifying that one organisation leads
- Hear from each individual organisation about why they want to be involved, and why this is important to them

- Ask for general suggestions about group working, time commitments and possible solutions whilst making it clear that re-defining the problem and possible solutions should be part of the project itself

As one project representative said:

“If I were the funder I would want evidence that all providers have written the bid, otherwise you get one strong provider who takes responsibility, so actually would be good to see commitment from every individual voice at project start. You see ownership from all immediately, and see who if any is a weak link or sleeping partner.”

j. Comparing the definition of collaboration between funders and the funded

In practice, it appears that in most cases each project consortia identified a need, and fitted a very practical concept of collaboration into this funding strand. They were, in general, very happy to work side-by-side, and **certainly benefited from**:

- Sharing information (towards identifying the best possible solution)
- Greater momentum (decision-making took longer but it was harder to put the project on the back burner when it is shared with others)
- Lowering the risk (by sharing responsibility for purchase decisions)
- Reducing workload

In this way the RCF projects were definitely a success. However, there is definitely some friction between the funding body’s more idealistic view of collaboration (Level 4 in table 1) and the projects’ very practical and functional view (usually Levels 2 or 3 in table 1). Funders may set out to promote collaboration as a useful endpoint in its own right, but in practice it is very hard for any organisation to focus on anything other than tangible gains. Every organisational representative needed to ‘sell’ the proposed solution to their college in order to be given time to work on it, thus the solution quickly became the focus:

“The idealistic view of collaboration as an end goal is fair enough, but the reality is that in FE the day job is paramount – every person’s job roles is getting larger as funding is cut. Each person needs to justify to his or her senior manager why this project is worthwhile, and the language usually has to be in terms of how the project will save money – hence the focus is on the solution to be created. They have to explain in terms of pound signs in order to be allowed time away from the front line.” [Project 5 representative]

This was particularly true given the level of detail required at bid stage.

The greatest benefits to collaborative working are very difficult to explain, especially at the beginning of a project. It is far better for them to be trained in these methods whilst working on a project, and in this way the RCF funding model was an ideal vehicle. However there are

definitely aspects of the funding structure that could be improved upon. There is a need for the funder to recognise that the project representatives are going to be goal driven, at least at the beginning of a project. It is the funder's responsibility to educate them on the wider aspects of collaborative working. This means not just talking generically about collaboration, but providing a blueprint including successful examples and practical tools to facilitate collaborative discussions. It would also be useful to clarify the importance of the collaborative aspects to a project in more detail at the ITT stage.

Whilst the LSIS associates did a fantastic job of coaching and were greatly valued by the projects, each project teams would arguably have benefited from more formal collaborative training for each project team, plus a request for them to use various tools and techniques that facilitate collaboration.

Some of the LSIS associates and all three of the project representatives that the author spoke with in person agreed that **more formalised training** for each project team right at the start would have been beneficial, notably in terms of:

- The benefits and possibilities of collaborative working
- Practical methods for running a collaborative project
- The inclusion of a memorandum of understanding to clarify the expectations of the consortia on each organisation¹
- Core project management skills
- How to deal with the politics of collaborative projects (admitting at the start that they may come across conflicts of interest, or unequal effort between organisations, and agreeing a plan of action for dealing with this)
- Identifying meaningful, practical and valid key performance indicators
- How to formalise on-going collaboration after the project ends (e.g. higher level and between organisations and not individuals)
- How to write and promote a good end of project case study (this should not just been seen as a necessary evil to provide for the funder, but also something that can be marketed by the organisations)

“Professional Dialogue Skills training for all projects would have made a huge difference if this has been mandatory at the start.” [LSIS associate]

“I did actually talk to the Principal pointing out that for Project 1 to progress, it probably needed a more formalised agreement at a higher level than just head of department/on-side lecturer etc ... and funding secured to support it! Project 5 are fine because they have a formal regional agreement for collaboration. Projects 6 and 8 - hard to say if collaboration will continue. I tend to feel that in both cases it is individuals driving it, and that if they went ... who knows.” [LSIS associate]

¹ Project 5 was the only known project who did this at project start. Project 8 did end up doing this in order to galvanise some members of the project team into action.



There is some friction between the idealised nature of collaboration for its own intrinsic benefits (from the funder and associates) and collaboration as a practical means to an end (from the funded organisations). Projects were already asked to specify so much at the bidding stage that they were already limited once a project began, and collaborative opportunities to create a shared voice were already lost.

Projects **certainly benefited from:**

- Sharing information (towards identifying the best possible solution)
- Greater momentum (decision-making took longer but it was harder to put the project on the back burner when it is shared with others)
- Lowering the risk (by sharing responsibility for purchase decisions)
- Reducing workload

The value of the collaborative process could be greatly increased by changing the specificity at bid-writing stage, clarifying the importance of learning collaborative techniques in the ITT, and providing practical training to all organisational representatives at project start. Examples of topics to cover in training include:

- The benefits and possibilities collaborative working
- Practical methods for running a collaborative project
- The inclusion of a memorandum of understanding to clarify the expectations of the consortia on each organisation
- Core project management skills
- Identifying meaningful, practical and valid key performance indicators
- How to deal with the politics of collaborative projects
- How to formalise on-going collaboration after the project ends
- How to write and promote a good end of project case study

5. Models for successful collaboration

From the evidence collected during this study, successful collaborations are more likely to occur when the consortia are made up of organisations that are:

- Geographically close together
- Within the same FE subsector
- Contain no fewer than three and no more than five consortium members
- Are given individual roles and responsibilities
- Must attend e.g. a one day training event about collaboration, collaborative techniques, conflict resolution etc.

For their part, funders should:

- Accept that collaboration is the vehicle a consortium will use to get to a destination (e.g. the creation of a resource/solution). The organisations are unlikely to view the process of collaboration as an important project outcome, especially at the start.
- Highlight the importance of collaboration and the use of collaborative project management techniques at the ITT stage
- At project start, provide each project team with training about how to work collaboratively plus a request that they must use practical project management tools that support collaborative work within their project processes. These can be documented and forwarded to the funder during the project.
- Create an end of project case study in a new format that better captures aspects of the project and which is perhaps not attached to the final tranche of funding (therefore allowing projects to be more honest). An example of single page narratives are available in the LiT impact study report.

6. Recommendations

The main recommendation from this Impact Study is for funders to **provide a better framework for describing and facilitating collaboration and effective teamwork between organisations**. The LSIS associates are fantastic facilitators to be used throughout the project, but it would be very useful at project start to:

- Clearly identify that a central goal of the project is to allow members to practice collaborative project management techniques (at an individual level) and enhance/start collaborations at an organisational level. This will be carried out through a project to create a resource/solution to a common issue.
- Require all organisational representatives to attend training on collaborative techniques and project management (see previous section for details)
- Better define the structure of the project in terms of steps to address, techniques to use during meetings, and methods to measure and feedback on progress during and at the end of the project.

An example of such a project structure, identifying the steps through which each consortium should move, is as follows:

Timeline	Step	Steps to address during project meetings
Meeting 1	Prior to project start	<p>Formally name the individual representative from each organisation. Formally agree a project leader who agrees to facilitate and not lead the group.</p> <p>Project group meet to attend half day / day of training on collaborative and project management techniques, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The benefits and possibilities collaborative working • Practical methods for running a collaborative project • The inclusion of a memorandum of understanding to clarify the expectations of the consortia on each organisation • Core project management skills • How to deal with the politics of collaborative projects (admitting at the start that they may come across conflicts of interest, or unequal effort between organisations, and agreeing a plan of action for dealing with this) • How to formalise on-going collaboration after the project ends (e.g. higher level and between organisations and not individuals) • How to write and promote a good end of project case study (this should not just be seen as a necessary evil)

		to provide for the funder, but also something that can be marketed by the organisations)
Meeting 2	Project start	Formally describe the problem. Discuss ownership and responsibility, and how to ensure everyone continues to feel involved. Identify the people in each organisation but outside of the core project group who are the key gatekeepers and/or who will be affected by the project. Employ methods to ensure they are kept up-to-date from the start. Recognise they can otherwise cause problems in the future. Accept they may well be cautious.
	Learn about the current process	What is currently happening? Who are the 'customers' and what do they need? Describe them and their role. Ask them what they need. Identify their strengths and limitations. Identify metrics to collect. Decide how to collect them. Ensure a baseline metric will be collected from each organisation before next meeting.
	Describe the solution in theory	Identify what needs to change in terms of both improving and/or standardising the new system. Describe the ideal situation.
Between meetings (possible video conferences)	Identify the solution in practice	Search for available solutions (e.g. software/hardware) and share findings. Decide whether to buy, re-purpose or build anew. Agree on the nature of the solution.
Meeting 3	Create / build the solution	Formally agree the solution. Identify practical ways forward in terms of buying/building/integrating this at a consortium and at an individual organisation level. Agree a method for testing this within each organisation, and a format for reporting back.
	Test the solution	Test the solution in each organisation. Report back to share findings from the test stage. Discuss any changes or tweaks required.
Between meetings (possible video conferences)		

		Collect initial success metrics.
Meeting 4	Feed back on how well the solution worked, and next steps	<p>Feedback on how well the project worked within each organisation. Share information on metrics collected.</p> <p>Agree on an author for a single-page project narrative/case study (template provided from LSIS) PLUS a single page narrative from the perspective of each individual organisation involved. Photographs, screen grabs etc to illustrate this are encouraged. Disseminating these narratives across the sector is encouraged.</p> <p>Identify one final date for collecting metrics once solution is embedded – say in 6 months. Agree to a final meeting or videoconference on an agreed date.</p> <p>Identify next steps – are formal collaborative agreements suitable for future working?</p>
Video conference / meeting after project end	Follow-up information share	<p>Share information on what has happened since the end of funding.</p> <p>Share information on latest metrics.</p> <p>Agree any next steps, future collaborations or funding to apply for.</p>



The central recommendation of this impact study is for funders to maximise the collaborative process by:

- Clearly identifying that a central goal of the project is to allow members to practice collaborative project management techniques (at an individual level) and enhance/start collaborations at an organisational level. This will be carried out through a project to create a resource/solution to a common issue.
- Require all organisational representatives to attend training on collaborative techniques and project management (see previous section for details)
- Better define the structure of the project in terms of steps to address, techniques to use during meetings, and methods to measure and feedback on progress during and at the end of the project.