

## Strode College: Critical Friend Review

### Summary

In July 2011, six subjects at Strode College self-assessed as 'inadequate'. In September all of the subject leaders underwent a review with the Principal and Head of Quality to implement an action plan and set targets for improvement. In December a 'Critical Friend' scheme was piloted to support and review the targeted subjects, testing a hypothesis put forward by the subject leader on a teaching strategy which has led to improvement in performance. The results have shown that each subject is improving and some subjects are improving significantly.



### About Strode College

Strode College is a Tertiary college with 1500+ FT students, mainly 16-18

### The challenge

Overall the College has excellent A Level / GCSE results and so when poor exam results occurred in six subjects, alongside significant staffing changes, the results were that these six subjects self-assessed as Grade 4 for 2010-11. The College needed to ensure that the performance of these subjects improved greatly in 2011-12.

### The activity

- September 2011 each subject leader met with the Principal and Head of Quality for a subject review, an action plan was set and targets given. Each subject leader was then mentored by an experienced tutor/Advanced Practitioner.
- December 2011, each subject leader had to put forward a hypothesis regarding a teaching/assessment strategy that they had implemented over the last term which had / would improve the performance of their course.
- January/February 2012, a 'critical friend', who was either a member of EMT or the Head of Quality, investigated the hypothesis in conjunction with the line manager of the subject tutor.
- The investigation included: lesson observations; talking with students; reviewing assessments and the feedback; scrutinising mark-books; reviewing students survey comments; reviewing resources and Moodle course sites.

### The outcomes

The results of the review demonstrated that all of the subjects were progressing, some significantly, and that the hypotheses were proven to be making a positive impact. The results of the January modules also supported the findings of the review for those subjects that took January exams (5 out of 6).

### The impact

5 subjects took January modules: all improved their pass rates and most improved their high grade results – some significantly:

Subject	'10-'11 A*-G	'11-'12 A*-G	% diff	'10-'11 A*-C	'11-'12 A*-C	% diff
1 - Unit 1 (exam entries)	91% (85)	95% (74)	+4%	55%	76%	+21%
1 – Unit 2 (exam entries)	79% (29)	100% (22)	+21%	38%	55%	+17%
1 – Unit 3 (exam entries)	85% (65)	88% (25)	+3%	23%	48%	+25%
2 – Unit 1 (exam entries)	43% (7)	100% (5)	+57%	14%	40%	+26%
3 – Unit 3 (exam entries)	75% (8)	100% (9)	+25%	50%	100%	+50%
4 – Unit 1 (exam entries)	62% (13)	70% (10)	+8%	31%	20%	-11%
5 – SN 2 (exam entries)	91% (10)	100% (2)	+9%	73%	100%	+27%

Students were asked in the On-Programme survey how they would rate the 'quality of teaching and learning' of the subject using the Ofsted grades 1-4; the results below show the percentage of 'excellent/good' given to the 6 subjects over the last 2 years:

#### On-Programme Survey – Quality of Teaching & Learning

Subject	'10-'11 % of grades 1/ 2	'11-'12 % of grades 1/ 2
1	54%	83%
2	89%	84%
3	93%	100%
4	68%	96%
5	85%	86%
6	100%	94%

Student comments from the On-Programme survey highlight the progress and improvements that have been made over the first term for the subject areas; the majority of comments were extremely positive:

“(The Teacher) explains everything in a way that everyone understands and if they don't then he will go back over it until they do. In my case he is giving up his lunches to make sure I understand a part of the topic.”

“The way the information is conveyed to the class is put in such a way that it's easy to understand but hard enough to challenge us.”

“The way (*the subject*) is being taught is excellent, a very big improvement from last year.”

“I am really confident in the quality of teaching”

“It is structured and I know what I'm going to be doing every lesson without messing around back and forth through units”

The staff involved were also wholly positive about the review process, commenting on:

- the opportunity to discuss subject provision and pedagogy with an executive manager
- the value of an ‘external’ observer looking objectively at a specific aspect of their subject provision, but gathering evidence from a wide range of possible impacting factors
- the opportunity for open debate about the priorities and challenges around teaching a specific subject
- the need for honest reflection and openness to take on board feedback and new ideas in order to improve performance
- the investment of time and energy to ensure that the process was a positive experience and not negative
- the recommendation that the same process is carried out for ‘grade 3’ courses as it was so beneficial

### **The lessons learned**

- Enabling the subject tutors to choose a hypothesis which was to be investigated in an area of teaching and learning that they had developed gave the tutors responsibility and ownership of their course.
- The involvement of EMT in the process gave value to the process and demonstrated how important it was viewed by the College as part of the overall Quality Improvement strategy
- Thorough investigation which involved lesson observations, student feedback, assessment reviews and monitoring of resources (including VLE) stressed the importance of the review
- Meetings with the Principal, ‘Critical Friend’ and Head of Quality prior to the review gave a clear indication of the expectation of the process outcomes and the summary review meeting gave an opportunity to ‘celebrate’ improvements made with the tutor personally and highlight areas for development and support that still need to occur
- Feedback from both the tutors and line managers involved was very positive and their recommendation was that this process should be ‘rolled out’ to subjects/courses that had self-assessed as Grade 3. All agreed that ideally this would be very valuable – the main barrier to this happening is the time commitment of the process which is the main challenge for EMT involvement.