QIA Quality Improvement Agency

Evaluation of the National Peer Referencing Pilots

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for Lifelong Learning

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Acknowledgements

Foreword

How fast the world of education and skills evolves and develops. In November 2004, at the Association of Colleges (AoC) annual conference in Birmingham, a small group of visionary leaders met to consider the prospect of self-regulation for the further education (FE) system. One of the six 'solutions groups' established at that meeting was tasked with the 'identification of a taxonomy of self-regulating states and the design of a self-assessment tool'. In response to this challenge, the second meeting, of a now enhanced and enlarged AoC Self-Regulation Group, in June 2005, received a paper which 'built upon (current) self-assessment process(es) as a vehicle for self-regulation through peer assessment and grading, together with critical feedback'. By January 2006, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) had begun to establish eight national pilot projects to explore the practical applications of peer referencing within FE colleges. Over this period, and the subsequent 15 months of pilot activity led by the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA), at least six national policy initiatives or publications have been launched by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the LSC, and QIA which encourage the FE system to develop self-regulation and to consider how peer referencing can be used to demonstrate the capacity of the sector to take responsibility for improving standards and quality.

This evaluation report of the eight national pilots undertaken by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) expertly captures the essence of an initiative that has engaged and energised many of the thousands of practitioners who have been involved from almost 60 participating colleges. Clearly, peer referencing can successfully deliver a number of benefits. It can provide essential information about the rigour and accuracy of provider's self-assessment to support inspection; it can contribute to the development of organisations through feedback that is implemented through quality improvement plans; it can promote the identification and sharing of best practice through practical, and active, real-time engagement in learning, teaching and leadership; and it allows for action-based professional development. In short, the process challenges mediocrity and demands rigour, professionalism and improvement for the benefits of learners and employers.

The contribution that peer referencing can make to national policy initiatives is becoming better understood and its profile is increasing. This has been considerably enhanced though this project by the constructive and collaborative joint working of QIA, AoC and the LSC which has influenced and developed our collective and individual thinking. The Steering Group has also benefited from the contributions of Ofsted and Principals from the further education system in challenging and extending our understanding.

This evaluation report makes an important contribution to both the self-regulation and the quality improvement agenda. It is essential therefore that the momentum initiated by the these national pilots, and other peer review activities additional to those captured in this report, is built upon and further developed.

The Peer Referencing Steering Group welcomes the priority to develop and extend the work of peer referencing in the second phase of implementation arising

from the proposition to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills by Sir George Sweeney's Self-Regulation Implementation Group in March 2007. We encourage QIA to engage fully in contributing its expertise and services that it has demonstrated through the leadership of this project to Sir George in support of this next phase of development of peer referencing for, as many of the individuals who have participated in this peer review project have commented to me as I have travelled the country, it is the most significant initiative in which they have been involved for many years.

As with the significant pace of development since November 2004, the next three years will be critical on the path to self-regulation, and to the contribution that peer referencing will make to that journey.

Keith Dennis
Castle College Nottingham
Chair of the National Peer Referencing Pilots Steering Group

May 2007

Executive Summary

Aims of the evaluation

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

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

The pilot project was set up with five primary aims:

1. To identify and assess the utility of different approaches used within the pilot studies with the aim of developing different models for peer referencing.

2. To identify the critical success factors for effective peer referencing and any contextual factors that might affect these.

3. To assess the degree to which pilot projects have accelerated improvement and the capacity for self-improvement.

4. To assess the transferability of any good practice identified within the pilot projects to other parts of the further education system.

5. To offer recommendations on how peer referencing might be used to inform further developments in self-improvement and self-regulation within the further education system.

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

> *Groups of providers working together in using the views of fellow professionals and comparative performance indicators as reference points in assessing and improving the quality of provision within their organisations.*

Methodological approach

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

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

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

Main findings of the evaluation

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

Approaches to peer referencing and models of practice

The purposes of peer referencing

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

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

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

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

The scope of peer referencing activity

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

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

Diversity of the partnerships

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

Critical success factors for effective peer referencing

Nature of the partnerships

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

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

Values and codes of conduct

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

to a collectively agreed approach to conducting peer reviews also emerged as key factors for success.

Establishment of clear protocols and procedures

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

Leadership and management of projects

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

Commitment of senior staff

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

Attitudes, experience and skills of reviewers

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

Accelerating improvement and the capacity for improvement

Capacity to improve

Peer referencing helped to develop a 'culture of improvement' within and across partner institutions through new ways of working. It also enhanced the capacity of participating colleges to improve through networking, peer consultancy and other

collaborative initiatives. Opportunities to engage in professional dialogue with fellow peers and to participate in 'communities of practice' were seen as powerful factors in supporting improvement. Beyond peer assessment, the sharing of practice and support for the transfer of practice was seen as a critical part of the process.

Accelerated improvement

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

Professional development of staff

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

Sustaining and extending peer referencing activity

Lessons for the wider sector

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

Resources, funding and capacity issues

All eight projects have decided to continue their work beyond the duration of the pilots, which may reflect the expressed views of many senior staff that the benefits have outweighed the costs of this work. There were nevertheless concerns that

the costs of peer referencing might be a disincentive for some providers, particularly smaller organisations, who might lack the capacity to carry out this work.

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

Balancing the aims of peer referencing

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

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

Continuity and change in peer relationships

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

Role of national agencies

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

Recommendations for the further development of peer referencing

The following recommendations are addressed to policy makers, key stakeholders and college representatives involved with the design and delivery of the national peer referencing pilots, and to those with an influence on the further development

of peer referencing within the further education system, including the FE Self-Regulation Implementation Group.

It is recommended that:

1. The findings of this evaluation be accepted as evidence of the utility of peer referencing in supporting the capacity of colleges to self-improve and to self-regulate their own affairs.

2. Steps be taken to embed peer referencing within the mainstream review and development activities of FE colleges and other learning providers through appropriate forms of funding and support, and through links to other external review processes.

3. The purposes of peer referencing as developed through the pilots and articulated in QIA briefing papers, be accepted as the basis for undertaking future peer referencing work.

4. A set of core values and common protocols be developed by QIA, drawing on the critical success factors for peer referencing, to support further developments in this area of work.

5. Within a defined national framework (based on 3 and 4 above), peer referencing should be developed flexibly to meet the diverse needs and circumstances of providers from across the further education system.

6. In considering different models of peer referencing, a distinction be made between whole organisational reviews, thematic reviews on discrete aspects of provision, and reviews used for professional accreditation purposes.

7. In establishing peer referencing partnerships a variety of factors should be considered, including current or previous forms of collaboration, organisational mission and values, comparative performance, geographical location, the focus of review activity, availability of external funding and support, and optimum size of the peer referencing group.

8. Good practice in peer referencing, as developed over the course of the pilots, be consolidated by QIA into 'peer referencing toolkits' and good practice guidelines.

9. Whilst recognising the professional development function of peer review, further work be undertaken to define the skills base necessary for effective peer referencing and the national standards that might be developed to support this.

10. The findings of the evaluation should be disseminated widely to providers across the further education system in order to promote a better understanding of how peer referencing can be used to improve organisational and staff performance.

11. A new term should be adopted to more adequately reflect both the assessment and improvement functions of this work. QIA has proposed the term 'peer review and development' for this purpose.

12. The major national bodies, including QIA, the LSC, Ofsted and the provider representative bodies, should work closely together to further develop the policy and practice of peer review and development as part of moves towards a more self-regulating sector.

1   Introduction

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

1.1   Aims and objectives of the evaluation

The over-arching aims of the external evaluation are to assess the outcomes of the national peer referencing pilot projects, to understand more effectively the processes involved in peer referencing and to make recommendations on how peer referencing could be further developed to support self-improvement and self-regulation within the further education system. The primary aims of the evaluation were as follows:

● Identify and assess the utility of different approaches used within the pilot studies with the aim of developing different models for peer referencing.

● Identify the critical success factors for establishing effective peer relationships and any contextual factors that might affect these.

● Assess the degree to which pilot projects have accelerated quality improvement and the capacity for self-improvement.

● Assess the transferability of any good practice identified within the pilot projects to other parts of the further education system.

● Offer recommendations on how peer referencing might be used to inform further developments in self-improvement and self-regulation within the further education system.

The QIA identified a number of secondary evaluation objectives as follows:

● Identify any training and communications materials and practices used to support the pilot projects which would merit wider dissemination.

● Comment on approaches used, or potential for, the incorporation of the 'learner voice' in the peer referencing process.

● Comment on any engagement of employers and other stakeholders in the process.

● Identify any equality and diversity issues.

● Assess how effectively technology can support the collaborative networks.

● Assess the relationship demonstrated in the pilots between self-evaluation and external evaluation and how the two can best complement each other.

● Record any resource and funding issues and their impact on the pilots.

- Identify any regional factors in the performance and nature of the individual pilots, for example, local partnership characteristics, structural differences or provider/learner demographic differences.

The outcomes from this formative evaluation will contribute to a wider ranging summative evaluation of QIA's programmes and services designed to support the further development of self-improvement, self-regulation and closer partnership working within the sector, and will assess how peer referencing will fit within the agenda for self-regulation.

1.2 Methodological approach

The approach to the evaluation was both formative and summative. As well as identifying key outcomes from the pilots, the evaluation also took into account the developmental aspects of the project, as well as the lessons learnt and 'distance travelled by the pilot partnerships. The evaluation was also strategic, linking the research findings to the wider policy context and aiming to identify ways in which the project could inform policy objectives in relation to quality improvement and self-regulation in the further education system.

The evaluation used qualitative methods of data collection and analysis and was divided into two phases, as outlined below.

1.2.1 Phase one (September–October 2006)

This phase of the research consisted of:

- **Desk-based research** drawing on a range of documentary sources including: recent policy documents on self-improvement, self-regulation and closer partnership working in the further education system; recent research literature on partnership working and good practice sharing in FE; and progress reports submitted by participants in the peer referencing pilots.

- **Mapping exercise**: this aimed to build a picture of the main features of the pilots, the different models and approaches adopted, and key emerging issues. Information was obtained mainly through information from the QIA, initial interviews with project leaders and the pilot progress reports.

- **In-depth interviews** (face-to-face and by telephone) with project managers, staff and key stakeholders in the pilot projects. Fourteen interviews were conducted by telephone, mainly with project leaders, and these informed the initial mapping exercise of the pilots. Interview questions included: the background to the pilot projects and partnerships; different approaches to peer referencing and main activities undertaken and planned; views on the main strengths, challenges and lessons learnt to date; identification of any 'critical success factors'; and future sustainability of peer referencing activities.

- **Interviews** were also conducted with seven stakeholders representing the following organisations: the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA), the National Learning and Skills Council (NLSC), the Association of Colleges (AoC), and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). These organisations are all

represented on the Steering Group for the National Peer Referencing Pilot Projects. Interview questions focused on the role of the national Steering Group and external agencies; the strategic aims of the peer referencing pilots; and the future sustainability of peer referencing and its contribution to self-regulation in the further education system.

1.2.2 Phase two (November 2006–March 2007)

In the second phase of the evaluation the research team visited a sample of participating colleges to conduct further face-to-face interviews with a representative range of college staff engaged in the peer referencing activities. The interviews aimed to: build in-depth case studies of the pilots; obtain information about the impact of participation in the pilots at an institutional level; and explore participants' views on the strengths and challenges of peer referencing and the main lessons learnt.

Over the course of phase two, 26 colleges were visited and over 40 interviews were conducted, either individually or in focus groups. A total of 56 college staff were consulted about their views and experiences of participation in the pilot, including principals, vice-principals, quality directors and other senior staff, programme leaders and managers, teaching staff, support staff and others.

Findings from the case studies have informed this final evaluation report, which focuses on the outcomes and impact of peer referencing processes and activities within the pilots. It aims to identify the critical success factors for effective peer referencing and to offer conclusions and recommendations on how lessons learnt from the pilot project might be used to inform further developments in quality improvement and self-regulation within the further education system.

1.2.3 QIA workshops

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

1.3 Structure of the report

- Chapter 2 of the report provides an overview of the policy context for peer referencing in relation to quality improvement and self-regulation in the Further education system, and considers the role of peer referencing within this broader policy agenda. It also outlines findings from previous research into peer referencing and the sharing of good practice.

- Chapter 3 outlines the background to the pilot project and presents a profile of the individual pilots, followed by a discussion of the different models and approaches to peer referencing within the pilots.

- Chapter 4 considers key strengths and successful outcomes from the pilots, with a particular focus on evidence of progress in terms of institutional capacity for improvement, accelerated quality improvement and staff development.

- Chapter 5 explores the challenges and constraints experienced by pilot participants, and considers some strategies to address these.

- Chapter 6 offers an assessment of the critical success factors for establishing effective peer relationships.

- Chapter 7 discusses issues of sustainability and future developments planned beyond the pilot project.

- The final chapter offers the main conclusions and recommendations from the evaluation.

2   Policy context for peer referencing

The national peer referencing pilot project took place at a time of significant change within the further education system. One of the main aims of the evaluation was to consider outcomes from the pilot project within this broader policy framework and to assess the potential contribution of peer referencing to the further development of self-improvement and self-regulation across the sector. This chapter presents a brief review of the key policy developments in self-improvement and self-regulation to have taken place in recent years and considers the role of peer referencing within this agenda.

2.1   Government strategies for raising quality standards in the further education system

The recently published Leitch Review of Skills[1] highlighted a productivity gap between the UK and other developed nations. It also pointed to the importance of developing the national skills base in order not only to bridge this gap, but to maximise productivity, economic prosperity and social justice.

The further education system has a central role to play in addressing the skills needs of the UK workforce. The 2005 review of the future role of FE colleges conducted by Sir Andrew Foster[2] acknowledged this role and outlined a vision for the future. The review makes the point that FE colleges are generally perceived as not realising their potential, and that there has been little narrowing in the performance between the best and worst colleges over the preceding six years. It identifies five key imperatives for the sector, one of which is quality improvement. It also acknowledges the limitations of inspections in driving up quality and makes a useful distinction between proving quality and improving it. To achieve the latter, the review advocates colleges taking ownership for their own quality improvement through self-assessment and peer review.

The 2006 White Paper 'Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances'[3] responded to the Foster Review by outlining a reform programme for the further education system. The Paper is broadly consistent with the Foster Review in emphasising the responsibility of colleges and providers for quality improvement. The Paper announced the setting up of the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) with a remit to develop a single, integrated Quality Improvement Strategy. It also set out a number of measures to encourage collaborative partnerships and make it easier for the best providers to spread their influence across the system and lead change. The White Paper also promised measures for robust intervention to tackle failing and mediocre provision, alongside more autonomy for the excellent.

The White Paper built in part on the LSC's 'Agenda for Change' (2005)[4]. This sets out proposals for a programme of change. Two of the key themes in the prospectus are: creating colleges that are seen by employers as their partner of choice for developing the skills they need, and improving the quality of provision. To address quality, the LSC has outlined a five-point plan designed to encourage a culture of self-improvement and create stronger links between quality assurance and development planning:

- Develop a culture of self-improvement and peer-referencing where colleges worked collaboratively to improve quality.

- Place quality improvement at the heart of the annual planning review process undertaken by colleges and the LSC.

- Develop more effective performance measures which are consistent across the sector and easily accessible to learners, employers and other stakeholders.

- Clarify and develop the roles and responsibilities of all agencies involved in supporting quality improvement, including the LSC, inspectorates and the QIA.

- Improve leadership, management and workforce development across the sector.

Across all the above documents, the primary responsibility for quality improvement is seen to rest with the colleges and providers themselves. The role of the LSC, QIA and inspectorates is seen to be to support developments in quality improvement.

2.2   Towards self-improvement and self-regulation

The Foster Review of Further Education advocates a move away from centralisation towards greater self-regulation. It looks at the considerable efforts colleges are required to make to prove quality of provision to various interested bodies, and notes that this can detract from efforts directed at continuous improvement and the ownership of quality improvement. Self-assessment through rigorous benchmarking and peer review is seen as the way towards self-regulation.

Pursuing Excellence, the national improvement strategy for the further education system[5], emphasises the development of a culture of continuous self-improvement through rigorous and challenging self-assessment, and the sharing of expertise between colleges. Peer review is viewed as a key element in the drive for such sharing. The document makes a commitment to develop and evaluate pilot projects on peer review. This evaluation is part of that effort.

The LSC is developing a comprehensive performance assessment framework[6] linked to the Common Inspection Framework (CIF) and intended to complement the QIA's improvement strategy. The framework is intended to provide accessible and reliable information on college performance and will support self-assessment and peer review as well as facilitating the external assessment of provider performance.

The 2006 White Paper included the following statement in Chapter 7 'A new relationship with colleges and providers':

We want to create a modern more self-regulating form of college autonomy where colleges work together to set, review and raise standards and achieve continuous improvement in the interests of learners, employers and

the local community. We will work with colleges, the AoC and other representative organisations to develop proposals for greater self-regulation which make a reality of this vision.

In a speech to the AoC Annual Conference in November 2006, the Secretary of State issued a challenge to the further education sector progressively to take collective responsibility for its own future destiny and reputation and thus forge a new relationship with government. A Self-Regulation Steering Group under the Chairmanship of Sir George Sweeney has responded to this challenge by producing an initial proposition on how the self-regulation agenda should be taken forward. Peer review is viewed by the Group as a significant process in the further development of this work.

2.3 Previous research into peer referencing and the sharing of good practice in FE

Recent research by Cox (2006)[7] drew on a number of case studies across the further education system in order to identify different models for good practice sharing and to develop a better understanding of strategies for transferring good practice between institutions. Cox points out that much of the sharing of good practice that takes place is carried out in a passive way and without the active engagement of staff in the process. He also notes that there has been no systematic attempt to measure the impact of good practice transfer and that there is a need to understand the process of the sharing and transfer of good practice from the perspective of the individual or organisation hoping to adopt the practice involved.

The study also identifies a number of crucial success factors for the sharing and transfer of good practice, which have significant implications for the peer referencing pilots:

- The confidence of participants in the source of the practice and how this can be established and maintained at both practitioner and organisational levels.

- The nature and status of the relationship between participants and whether this is based on an equal exchange and recognition of the reciprocal benefits of sharing.

- The geographical proximity of the organisations involved and the extent to which this helps or hinders practice sharing.

- The development of active learning processes involving experiential sharing (for example, through demonstrations, feedback, support and coaching) and whether time and resources are made available for these activities.

- The leadership and management of organisational change, senior management support for good practice sharing and adequate resourcing of the process.

- The capacity to assess and measure the impact and benefits of sharing activity, to benchmark performance and to establish performance baselines for assessing 'distance travelled'.

An evaluation of the 'League for Learning' national peer referencing pilot project[8] was recently carried out, which identified a number of factors that were considered to be influential in the success of the project, including: a sense of ownership and commitment to the project; emphasis on the benefits of peer referencing in terms of staff development; clear communication between colleges about expectations of the peer review process; the professionalism of the peer review team; effective management and leadership shown by lead reviewers; professional dialogue and the sharing of ideas both during and after reviews; and adaptability of the peer referencing process to meet the needs of participants.

Participants emphasised the importance of the commitment, expertise and skills of the individuals concerned in making peer review successful. They also raised the issue of how peer review would fit with other regulatory practices, and the concern that peer review should not become an extra burden in terms of bureaucracy and resources. It was felt that peer review must include the validation of self-assessments in order for it to be a step towards self-regulation, but that it also offered the opportunity to support development. Peer review was considered to require a large commitment in terms of time. Staffing the peer review process with capable individuals also had an impact on the availability of staffing resources.

The evaluation of the national peer referencing pilots has aimed to build on these findings to explore further the nature and role of peer referencing and its potential contribution to the broader agenda for quality improvement and closer partnership working within the further education system.

[1]   HM Treasury (2006) Prosperity for All in the Global Economy – World Class Skills, The Stationery Office

[2]   DfES (2005) Realising the Potential: A review of the future role of further education colleges, DfES

[3]   HMSO (2006) Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances, HMSO

[4]   LSC (2005) Learning and Skills – the Agenda for Change: The Prospectus, LSC

[5]   QIA (2007) Pursuing Excellence: the national improvement strategy for the further education system, QIA

[6]   LSC (2007) Framework for Excellence: Raising standards and informing choice, LSC

[7]   Cox, P. (2006) Good Practice Transfer in Post-16 Learning: Strategies that work, LSDA

[8]   Foster, H. (2006) Evaluation of the League for Learning Self-Regulation Pilot Project, The Research Centre, City College Norwich

3 The national pilots: peer referencing models and partnerships

3.1 Background to the pilots

The previous chapter discussed the growing emphasis on self-regulation and self-improvement within the further education system and the critical strategic role of peer referencing within the quality improvement agenda. This chapter provides an account of the development and implementation of the peer referencing pilot project, which aimed to test out different approaches to peer referencing and evaluate its effectiveness as a tool for enhancing the capacity of colleges to self-assess and self-improve.

The national peer referencing pilot project was a collaborative initiative developed by three organisations working in partnership: the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA), the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the Association of Colleges (AoC). Early in 2006, an invitation was sent out for partnerships of colleges willing to participate in the pilots, and eight partnerships were chosen from among these volunteers. The pilot project was restricted to FE colleges, although the longer-term aim is to extend peer referencing activities to other parts of the further education system and to include other providers within work based learning, adult and community learning, and community and voluntary organisations.

One of the key purposes of the pilot project was to identify different models and approaches to peer referencing, and for this reason, the selection process aimed to include a range of different partnerships, geographical locations and types of provision. The eight pilot partnerships were:

- East Midlands Partnership

- Landex – Land Based Colleges Aspiring to Excellence

- League for Learning

- London South Vocational FE Best Practice Forum

- North West Colleges

- North West Independent Specialist Colleges

- South East Region Pathfinder Pilot Project

- South West Regional Improvement Partnership Project.

The pilot project began in January 2006 and continued until March 2007.

3.2 The definition of peer referencing

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

Groups of providers working together in using the views of fellow professionals and comparative performance indicators as reference points in assessing and improving the quality of provision within their organisations.

It has been noted that there is some confusion within the sector about the nature of peer referencing and the extent to which it should focus on peer assessment and benchmarking on the one hand, or peer support and development on the other. The QIA have indicated that peer referencing should be regarded primarily as a *process* which incorporates both assessment-focused and development-focused activities. Although decisions about the scope of the peer referencing pilots were left up to the colleges themselves, they were requested to address a number of core activities including:

- the benchmarking of performance, using agreed performance measures

- the validation of self-assessment judgements and processes

- the identification of strengths, areas for improvement and action plans to address these

- the sharing and transfer of good practice

- collaborative working to support improvement activities

- overall judgements on the organisational 'capacity to improve'.

Each pilot project was also expected to include a range of support activities such as project governance and management, project planning, the selection and training of staff and allocation of resources.

3.3 Overview of peer referencing activities and processes

While the aims and objectives of the individual pilots varied, they reflected a common commitment to addressing the different aspects of the peer referencing process as outlined above, including elements of both peer assessment and peer support. The majority of pilots (East Midlands, League for Learning, North West, South East, South West) developed a common core of peer referencing activities centred around the organisation of a cycle of review visits to each partner college. Common activities across these pilots were as follows:

- An initial planning phase to reach agreement on a common understanding of the review process; peer review protocols and procedures; the scope and focus of reviews; composition of review teams; and shared documentation etc.

- The organisation of a structured programme of peer reviews in which each partner college was visited by a team of reviewers who conducted observations and/or assessments of the host college's processes and

practices, as outlined in a pre-arranged 'memorandum of agreement'. Review visits could be one, two or three days in length. Review findings would later be shared with the host college, followed by discussions/dialogue about how areas identified for improvement could be jointly addressed.

- Within this broad commonality of approach, there were significant variations across the pilots, for example, in terms of the focus and range of the review visits. Whereas some partnerships aimed to conduct full institutional reviews, others focused on reviews of cross-college themes or selected curriculum areas. Some pilots tested out a combination of these approaches. Cross-college themes were usually linked to the Common Inspection Framework and included the self-assessment process; quality assurance mechanisms; leadership and management; capacity to improve; employer engagement; Every Child Matters; additional learner support; and the learner voice. The scope of the reviews was either agreed in advance across the partnership or determined by the host college before each visit.

- There were variations too in the formation (and composition) of review teams, depending to some extent on the size of the partnership or the broader review aims. For example, some pilots adopted a 'triad' formation, with reviewers from two colleges visiting a third (L4L, SE, SW). Members of the review teams in the SE and SW were rotated for each visit, as it was felt that reciprocal visits might encourage 'cosiness' between partners. In other pilots, the review teams consisted of staff from all the other partner colleges – in the case of the larger East Midlands group, this meant that review teams had at least 10 members.

The London South partnership had also carried out some informal peer review visits, but there appeared to have been a slower rate of progress towards a more fully developed peer referencing methodology and practice. The focus of this project was primarily on the sharing of practice and the building of relationships necessary to support rigorous assessments.

Both Landex and NWISC had different starting points, to some extent, from the other partnerships. The core aim of the Landex pilot was to develop a peer referencing methodology within a broader model of self-regulation for the land-based college sector. The focus of the federation's first year of activity was on setting up the infrastructure for self-regulation and appointing key personnel to implement the quality improvement strategy, while the organisation of peer review visits between member colleges was part of the plan for year two. For NWISC the aim was to establish 'baselines' for performance across five main strands of activity. As part of this strategy there had been some visits between partner colleges to observe teaching and learning and to validate self-assessment reports (SARs).

Associated activities across the pilots included: the development of joint documentation for peer review visits; standardisation of review procedures (for example, observation of teaching and learning); training and briefing sessions for reviewers; and meetings of project managers and others to evaluate the effectiveness of the reviews, and to further disseminate good practice.

3.4 Profile of the peer referencing pilots

This section provides more detailed profiles of each individual pilot. For a clearer understanding of the different approaches taken within the project, the pilots have been grouped according to whether they undertook a) full institutional reviews or b) thematic reviews. The Landex pilot represents a third approach of peer referencing within a broader strategy aimed at moving towards a model of professional accreditation and development for land-based colleges.

3.4.1 Full institutional reviews

East Midlands Partnership

Participating colleges

Group one:

- Brooksby Melton College

- Castle College Nottingham

- Leicester College

- North Nottinghamshire College

- South Nottinghamshire College

- West Nottinghamshire College.

Group two:

- Chesterfield College

- Lincoln College

- Northampton College

- Stephenson College.

Background

There were 10 colleges participating in the pilot, representing all the counties in the East Midlands. Group one was an already established partnership which had been working together for four years around benchmarking and sharing good practice. This pilot group felt well placed to move into more formal peer referencing activities. Group two colleges were specifically recruited to participate in the pilot project and had not worked together before.

Aims and objectives

- Undertake peer review to contribute to effective self-assessment and to assist in more effective action planning for quality improvement.

- Build the capacity of partners to undertake more rigorous and effective self-assessment, peer review, and quality improvement.

- Develop and evaluate frameworks for peer review that over time will meet, and lead to changes in the requirements of stakeholders.

- Identify and share good practice amongst partner colleges.

- Jointly identify and organise improvement and development activities.

Leadership and management

Responsibility for overall leadership of the pilot was initially undertaken by West Nottinghamshire College but later passed to Castle College Nottingham. Operational management was carried out by two management groups consisting of senior managers from the partner colleges. A steering group was established, led by the regional LSC, which had a mainly advisory role. The steering group consisted of representatives from each of the partner colleges, the LSC, QIA, AoC, Emskills and an independent training provider.

Funding and support

The East Midlands LSC agreed to allocate £180,000 to the pilot project. Each college received £15,000 and the remainder was used to cover co-ordination time, administration and dissemination activities. The regional LSC also led the project steering group and offered ongoing support and encouragement. The AoC and QIA were involved through membership of the steering group.

Peer referencing activities

- Each pilot group organised a preparation event for participating staff to discuss protocols and procedures and confirm a common understanding of the review process.

- Organisation of a cycle of review visits between members of each pilot group. The review teams included participants from each college, with a team leader appointed for each review. Review teams were mixed and could include senior and middle managers, HR staff, teaching and support staff. The review visits took place over three days, with the agenda and focus of the review determined by the host college, as outlined in a 'memorandum of agreement'. Feedback was given to the host college both orally and in a written report.

- Building on previous partnership work, group one activities were extended into more formal institutional reviews, including reviews of cross-college themes as well as various curriculum areas. Cross-college themes included self-assessment, quality assurance mechanisms, additional learner support, employer engagement, and the learner voice. The reviews also included an assessment of the college's capacity to improve based on definitions within the Common Inspection Framework.

- Group one also aimed to incorporate an employer responsiveness perspective through links with the regional Emskills project. Some progress was made towards developing a model of peer review that could be used to verify colleges' self-assessments against the Emskills framework.

- Group two agreed that the reviews would focus on validation of the host college's self-assessment reports in selected curriculum areas, and on building the foundations of the peer relationship.

- Other activities included the development of common documentation for peer reviews; planning and briefing sessions for review teams; inclusion of internal reviewers in some teams (group two); and joint evaluation and dissemination events for both pilot groups.

Key outcomes

- Establishment of a new network of colleges in the East Midlands, which had not worked together previously, and consolidation of an existing partnership.

- Commitment and active involvement of senior staff in all partner colleges.

- Successful completion of a cycle of review visits involving all ten participating colleges.

- Establishment of agreed protocols, methodology and documentation for conducting peer reviews.

- Development of more effective and rigorous self-assessment and improvement planning processes.

- Representation of a range of staff in review teams, including internal reviewers, to facilitate the process of identifying and implementing improvements.

- Two hundred staff involved in joint improvement activities organised by partner colleges.

- Utilisation of peer review to support a merger process between two colleges.

- Joint action on a survey of training needs and development programme for senior and middle managers.

Future plans

- Both groups are committed to continuing peer referencing activities after completion of the pilot project. The partnership will retain the current model of a cycle of three-day reviews conducted by a review team including representatives from all participating colleges. Planned changes for 2007 include: use of the Framework for Excellence as the basis for validation of self-assessments; the inclusion of principals and, where possible, governors in the peer review process; and follow up visits to assess and monitor the impact of

peer review visits. The 10 colleges involved in the East Midlands partnership are also planning to hold a conference on leadership and management development.

League for Learning

The League for Learning is a national partnership of eight colleges which formed in 2004 to work collaboratively on quality improvement and sharing good practice. Six colleges from the partnership participated in the peer referencing pilot project, forming two sub-groups:

Group A:

● City College Norwich

● Lewisham College

● West Nottinghamshire College.

Group B:

● Doncaster College

● Hull College

● North Hertfordshire College.

Aims and objectives

● Verify each college's self-assessment report by testing the host college's judgements.

● Provide a mature, challenging and professional dialogue focused on the development of practice.

● Follow up peer review visits with supported development activities in areas identified for improvement.

● Share good practice between partner colleges.

Whereas Group A made use of the Common Inspection Framework as the basis for conducting peer review and verification, Group B additionally included a focus on the EQFM Business Excellence Model framework.

Leadership and management

The project was led initially by West Nottinghamshire College, with the leadership passing to City College Norwich in April 2006. A project steering group was formed of senior staff from each college, and this provided the strategic direction of the pilot. The steering group reported to the L4L's Principals' Group.

Funding and support

The pilot was self-funded and each college contributed between £20,000 and £25,000 to cover costs. In addition, the colleges collectively funded an external research report as independent evidence of progress made. No other forms of external support were accessed.

Peer referencing activities

- A preparation event was organised and attended by over 50 staff from participating colleges. The aims of the meeting were to provide information about the pilot; clarify the peer referencing process and framework; reach a common understanding of peer review protocols and practices; and consider the support required by reviewers.

- Agreement of peer review protocols and procedures, including a 'memorandum of agreement' to be drawn up by the host college preceding each visit; participants to aim to keep reflective diaries.

- A structured programme of two-day review visits was planned to take place between March and June 2006, in which two colleges from the triad would visit a third. The focus of the review visits was determined by the host college; reviewing colleges then identified appropriate staff to act as reviewers. A range of staff was included in review teams and feedback was presented to the host college both orally and in the form of a written report.

- The focus of review visits included full institutional reviews (for example, of the college's capacity to improve); validation of self-assessment reports and processes; cross-college themes such as retention of 16–18 year olds, individual learning plans and student support; and various curriculum areas.

- The outcomes of the pilot were disseminated at the L4L annual conference.

Key outcomes

- Successful completion of a cycle of review visits involving all participating colleges. The review of one college was delayed because of an Ofsted inspection coinciding with the review date.

- Involvement of a learner in one of the review teams. This is now a formal recommendation for all future L4L peer reviews.

- Active support and commitment from all college principals.

- Development of an agreed peer review methodology including protocols, procedures and documentation.

- Sharing good practice and raising awareness of the benefits of peer referencing through preparation and dissemination events; also a range of staff involved in review teams.

- Consolidation and extension of links between partner colleges at various levels, for example, through ongoing professional dialogue; development of joint quality improvement strategies; establishment of critical friend networks etc.

- Improved self-assessment reporting and assessment procedures.

- Recording evidence of impact of peer review process in terms of quality improvement strategies, leadership and management, self-assessment processes, curriculum areas, reporting systems etc.

- Outcomes of peer reviews used to inform Ofsted AAV visit in one college and post-inspection plan in another.

- Commitment of all colleges to continuing peer referencing activities beyond the lifetime of the pilot.

Future plans

The steering group have already considered plans for phase two of the project, including a further eight peer reviews in clusters of four – all within the League for Learning. There will be a rotation of partner groups to form new collaborations, and to avoid the danger of the groups becoming too 'cosy'. There is also consideration of including a work-based learning provider as well as learners within the review teams.

North West Colleges

Participating colleges:

- Knowsley Community College

- Liverpool Community College

- Oldham Community College

- Riverside College.

Background

Knowsley, Liverpool and Oldham Colleges had a history of working together on quality issues over a number of years. Through the NW Quality Network, they had jointly conducted quality assurance exercises such as the validation of self-assessment processes and observations of teaching and learning. Riverside College was a new partner, recently formed as a result of a merger between Halton College and Widnes College. The partnership was self-brokered.

Aims and objectives

- Validate colleges' own judgements by scrutiny of the self-assessment process and available evidence.

- Build on previous collaborative work in validating the lesson observation process but extend to incorporate a formalised review process across all colleges.

- Take a risk-based approach to provision of support by identifying both individual and collective college needs and deploying resources accordingly.

- Use the strengths of individual colleges to improve provision across the partnership.

Leadership and management

Knowsley College was the lead partner in the pilot and undertook the administrative role. The pilot was overseen by an operational management group formed of senior managers from each college. There was also a steering group comprising the same senior managers, together with college principals and representatives from the LSC, AoC and QIA.

Funding and support

The pilot received no external funding. There was ongoing strategic and 'moral' support for the pilot from the LSC, QIA and AoC through their attendance at steering group meetings.

Project activities

- Initial management group meetings to decide protocols and procedures for reviews; scope of the review visits; composition of review teams; shared documentation etc.

- Structured schedule of two-day peer review visits, in which senior managers from three colleges formed a review team to visit the fourth. The visits took place twice a year and involved about 25 meetings with a range of staff (teaching, support and HR staff) and stakeholders (students and governors). The visits focused on a range of cross-college themes including the self-assessment process; leadership and management; employer engagement; capacity to improve; and Every Child Matters. Feedback was given to the host college in the form of an oral and a written report.

- Other activities: a further 30 staff were involved in paired lesson observations at partner colleges to validate the observation and grading process; a training event focusing on the standardisation of lesson observations; training sessions for reviewers; developing a common approach to engaging the learner voice through a common questionnaire and joint analysis/benchmarking of findings.

Key outcomes

- Establishment of common approach to peer review across the partnership, including protocols and procedures, documentation, review themes etc.

- Successful completion of two cycles of review visits to each college over the course of the pilot.

- Involvement of staff at all levels as well as learners and governors during peer review visits.

- Training offered to reviewers in the form of initial training sessions; conducting standardised lesson observations; and new reviewers 'shadowing' review teams.

- Instigation of student survey to benchmark learner opinions across all partner colleges.

- Additional support offered to a 'failing' college in the process of merging with a partner FE college through contribution to the Post Inspection Action Plan.

- Attendance at partner colleges' Annual Assessment Visits and self-assessment validation events.

Future plans

All colleges in the partnership were committed to continuing peer referencing activities after the completion of the pilot. They were also committed to encouraging the development of a wider network of colleges working to the same model of peer review, with the aim of rotating one college from each group annually from 2008. This approach was aiming to achieve a balance between continuity and change. Future themes for peer review would include 'the learner voice' and 'value for money'.

3.4.2 Thematic reviews

London South Vocational FE Best Practice Forum

Participating colleges:

- Bromley College

- Carshalton College

- Croydon College

- Kingston College

- John Ruskin College

- Merton College

- Richmond upon Thames College

- Orpington College

- Southwark College (volunteer from Central London LSC area).

Background

This was an already established, self-brokered partnership which aimed to build on previous collaborative work on quality issues; for example, participation in a London-wide project to promote 'added value' measures across vocational education. The partnership had also worked together through the FE Best Practice Forum, which was usually attended by senior managers and quality managers from FE colleges. The Forum took on a lead role in driving forward the group's involvement in the national peer referencing project.

Aims and objectives

- Moving forward with establishing measures for benchmarking performance in vocational education.

- Carrying out observations in curriculum areas across partner colleges to measure and improve the quality of teaching and learning.

- Sharing best practice in quality improvement.

- Improving quality in all processes associated with the 'learner journey'.

- Linking together the above aims to move towards a full institutional review process in the longer-term.

Leadership and management

The primary responsibility for co-ordination of the project was taken on by the South London Learning Partnership (SLLP), which received funding from London South LSC. The FE Best Practice Forum operated within SLLP (as did a number of other groups) and SLLP was able to provide access to resources and training for colleges. The FE Best Practice Forum participants (all Quality Managers with varying levels of responsibility) entered into self-brokered cluster groups, usually of three colleges. These clusters set their own agendas and processes towards peer referencing. The learning arising from undertaking the process of peer referencing within clusters was shared at the FE Best Practice Forum.

Funding and support

There was no specific funding available for pilot activities. The SLLP supported the project in a number of ways, including co-ordinating meetings, providing meeting venues and organising training events. It was reported that the LSC funding to SLLP would be reduced in the following academic year. The number of meetings would therefore reduce and each participating college would be asked to provide some small 'membership' funding for SLLP.

Project activities

- Regular meetings of the FE Best Practice Forum to discuss the issues involved in peer referencing and create action plans.

- Sharing of different observation schemes for teaching and learning and agreement of protocols for sharing data.

- Planning of a research project into 'critical success factors' for effective learning on vocational courses.

- Plans for production of a Quality Toolkit to promote best practice in Vocational Education.

- Visits between partner colleges to conduct observations (and other activities).

- Training workshops on developing skills in observation and personalised learning.

Key outcomes

- Informal peer review visits undertaken. Generally, this involved a visit by a Quality Manager to another college to review some area of practice.

- Transfer of peer review practice ideas, for example, a matrix to capture and assess the 'learner journey'.

Future plans

The clusters were planning to continue to work together and there was an intention to continue to participate in SLLP. However, the number of meetings of the Best Practice Forum were due to halve in the following academic year, and this was likely to limit the learning and transfer of good practice amongst the wider group of colleges.

North West Independent Specialist Colleges

Participating colleges:

- Arden College

- Beaumont College

- Bridge College

- David Lewis College

- Derwen College

- Henshaws College

- Langdon College

- Lindeth College

- Royal School for the Deaf.

Background

All the colleges in the partnership had been working together over the previous two years through the North West Network of Independent Specialist Colleges and with the regional LSC to develop common systems for training, observation and moderation. The aim of joining the national peer referencing pilot was to enable them to broaden the scope of these activities. The colleges offered provision to students with a wide range of physical and learning disabilities. The partnership was self-brokered.

Aims and objectives

The main aim of the pilot was to improve the quality of provision across the partnership and to establish standardised 'whole college performance indicators' in five main areas:

- observation of teaching and learning

- student performance

- college performance measures

- self-assessment and quality improvement plans

- management development and succession planning.

Leadership and management

In the early stages, a pilot steering group was set up, comprising eight college principals and some LSC representatives. As the pilot developed, five principals each took on responsibility for one of the five strands of activity and five working groups were established to move the project actions forward.

Funding and support

There was no external funding for the pilot. The partnership received active support from the regional LSC in terms of facilitating meetings and monitoring progress across the different strands of activity. The LSC also accessed the services of consultants to give training in observation of teaching and learning, as well as to provide general support and deadline reminders. As a group of relatively small colleges, they acknowledged the importance of this external support in keeping the momentum of the project going.

Project activities

The main focus of activities was to establish 'baselines' for each college within the five main strands and to share good practice:

- Strand one – teaching and learning observation. A regional teaching and learning observation network group was established and undertook the following activities: developing a group of trained observers to carry out

observations across all the partner colleges; organising meetings to moderate the processes and outcomes from observation visits; and collecting data on grades for benchmarking performance.

- Strand two – student performance. A common framework was developed for recording and monitoring the 'learner journey'; and a meeting was organised to review the framework and documentation from partner colleges.

- Strand three – college performance measures. There were plans to prepare standardised performance measures to facilitate benchmarking across the partnership, although this strand was put on hold until further information was available about the requirements of the Framework for Excellence.

- Strand four – self-assessment and quality improvement plans. A SAR validation framework was developed by a working group of college principals and was circulated to partner colleges for piloting and feedback. Three colleges conducted a cross-college validation process using the revised documentation and an external consultant was engaged to facilitate this process.

- Strand five – management development and succession planning. A range of cross-college activities was initiated including: audit of senior manager qualification and skills; audit of current management and development programmes; development of mentoring and work shadowing strategies; and development of cross-college network of Skills for Life managers.

Key outcomes

- Consolidation of a regional network of specialist colleges who were collaborating more actively on strategies for quality improvement.

- Active involvement of senior managers, including principals, vice-principals and quality managers.

- Positive steps taken towards developing a common approach to observation of teaching and learning across the partnership.

- Some visits carried out between colleges for observation of teaching and learning and validation of SARs.

- Development of common documentation across all the partner colleges for the observation of teaching and learning, recording student performance and SAR validation.

- Increased cross-college work on staff and management development.

- Positive feedback from Ofsted Annual Assessment Visits on outcomes from pilot activities (that is, SAR validation process).

- Spin-off quality consortia at ground level, for example, a 'Skills for Life' group.

Future plans

The group intended to continue its current activities after the pilot officially ended. The first step would be to complete the cycle of validation. Beyond this, the group would continue to look at quality issues in consultation with both the LSC and, it was hoped, eventually general FE colleges. The principals were interested in acting in an advisory capacity to similar specialist college networks being set up regionally or nationally.

South East Region Pathfinder Pilot Project

Participating colleges:

- Aylesbury College

- Brooklands College

- Chichester College

- City College Brighton and Hove

- East Berkshire College

- East Surrey College

- Eastleigh College

- Fareham College

- Hadlow College

- Milton Keynes College

- Newbury College

- North West Kent College.

Background

This was a new partnership and the colleges had no history of working together before. The project was initiated by a small group of colleges with the SE regional LSC, which then invited two colleges from each county in the region to participate. Leadership and management was identified as the main theme of the project.

Aims and objectives

- Create a regional network of general FE Colleges on the theme of quality improvement.

- Focus specifically on leadership and management and the capacity to improve as the key to quality improvement.

- Prepare senior staff from partner colleges to act as peer reviewers and to contribute a critical friend perspective to each institution's self-assessment process.

Leadership and management

The project was led by Eastleigh College, which also provided central administration. The partnership planned to establish a steering group in the third year, once the project had run through a second cycle of reviews.

Funding and support

There was no specific funding obtained for the pilot. However, active support was provided by the South East regional LSC in the form of initial brokerage of the partnership, provision of venues for all project meetings and access to six days consultancy from the Learning and Skills Network (LSN).

Peer referencing activities

- Meetings of college principals and senior managers to identify the project aims and focus; agree protocols and procedures for reviews and the role of the external reviewer; and review the pilot evaluation and plan future review cycles.

- Focus groups consisting of a range of college managers to review and share good practice in leadership and management across the partnership.

- Induction training of two senior staff from each college to act as peer reviewers.

- Peer reviewers took part in a cycle of college self-assessment events. The role of reviewer was viewed as that of 'critical friend', providing input into moderation of the college's self-assessment report. A pattern was established of paired reviews, that is, two reviewers from different colleges visiting a third, with a rotation of reviewers to avoid reciprocal visits. The reviewer observations and judgements were based on the Common Inspection Framework. Debriefing meetings for peer reviewers were led by an LSN consultant.

Key outcomes

- Establishment of a network of FE colleges in the SE region who had not previously worked together on quality improvement. The colleges made a commitment to conducting a further cycle of review visits and to broadening the focus of the reviews to include other themes.

- Commitment and active involvement at senior level in all colleges.

- Successful completion of a cycle of review visits between 11 of the participating colleges. (One college withdrew from the pilot to deal with a merger.)

- Establishment of agreed protocols and methodology for conducting peer reviews.

- Additional project activities including focus group meetings of managers at different levels to reflect on and share good practice in leadership and management; and training and support offered to peer reviewers.

Future plans

The partnership was committed to continuing to conduct peer referencing with the current network of colleges, although there would be changes to the pairings of colleges working together. There were plans to broaden the focus of peer referencing to include aspects of curriculum delivery as well as management. The SE LSC agreed to identify a second group of colleges, which would double the number of partcipating colleges. It was expected that this group would work through the development cycle of the first year of peer reviews before merging with the original group.

South West Regional Improvement Partnership Project

Table 3.1: Participating colleges

Cross-college reviews (2006-07)	Curriculum reviews (2005-06)
City of Bath	City of Bath
Gloscat	Gloscat
Penwith (subsequently withdrew)	Penwith
Royal Forest of Dean	Royal Forest of Dean
Weston	Somerset College of Arts and Technology
	South Devon
	Swindon
	Weston
	Weymouth
	Yeovil

Background

The SW Regional Improvement Partnership (SWRIP) began in spring 2005, when Somerset LSC obtained funding from the DfES to pilot a Sharing Best Practice initiative in the region. A steering group was formed (including representatives from colleges, the LSC, LSDA, AoC and Standards Unit) which identified the project aims and selected colleges to participate in sharing good practice across five agreed curriculum areas. The partnership volunteered to participate in the national peer referencing pilot in order to consolidate this work. The project activities were divided into two phases: the curriculum review phase (July 2005–July 2006) and the cross-college review phase (September 2006–March 2007) which involved a smaller number of colleges from the partnership – City of

Bath, Gloscat, Royal Forest of Dean and Weston. Penwith initially joined the review group but was unable to continue with the project.

Aims and objectives

The main aims in phase one (curriculum review) were to:

- identify strengths and weaknesses in each others' provision

- share and transfer identified good practice

- address common areas for quality improvement.

In phase two the aim was to move on from curriculum area reviews to a cross-college approach, involving peer assessment and judgements as well as the sharing of good practice.

Leadership and management

Somerset LSC continued to provide the leadership in phase one of the project. There were five self-managed pilot subgroups based on the five curriculum areas. In the second pilot phase a consultant was engaged from the Learning and Skills Network to facilitate project activities.

Funding and support

Initial funding was accessed from the DfES for the Sharing Best Practice initiative. The services of the external consultant for phase two of the pilot was funded through 'Support for Success', and this support was considered valuable for the implementation of the second phase. The LSC played an active role through initial brokering of the partnership, leading phase one of the pilot, and facilitating meetings.

Project activities

Phase one:

- Subgroups of colleges were formed to work around five selected curriculum areas as follows: Construction (Gloscat, South Devon, Swindon); Engineering (Gloscat, South Devon, Swindon, Weymouth); Hair and Beauty (Royal Forest of Dean, Weston); Health and Social Care (Gloscat, Penwith, Yeovil); and ICT (City of Bath, Somerset, Weston).

- Core activities included: visits to partner colleges to conduct observations of teaching and learning; discussions with staff and students; and comparison of SARs etc.

- Other activities included: cross-pilot meetings to develop action plans, discussion and dissemination of pilot outcomes etc; networking and joint working on quality improvement activities; and sharing good practice.

Phase two:

- There was an initial planning meeting to agree on a common approach to cross-institutional reviews, agree areas to be reviewed, and plan a schedule of review visits.

- A schedule of review visits to each college was planned, although the plan was modified in practice due to logistical difficulties. Reviewers were rotated to avoid reciprocal visits and reviewers' observations and judgements were fed back to the host college in written notes to inform future action planning. Debriefing meetings for peer reviewers were led by the LSN consultant.

- The focus of the reviews were chosen by the host colleges and included: SAR and quality improvement planning; learner and employer responsiveness; and 'moving from satisfactory to good' in teaching ICT.

Key outcomes

Phase one:

- Consolidation and development of strategies for sharing good practice across different curriculum areas (although only three of the five groups were reported to have achieved the outcomes identified in their initial action plans).

- Evidence of establishment of trust and professional dialogue at practitioner level.

- Evidence of identification and sharing of good practice leading to changes in institutional practice, for example, improved resource utilisation strategies; and dissemination of learning strategies etc.

Phase two:

- All colleges received a review visit, although compromises were made to the original plan to ensure visits were achieved in the timescale. These included sending reviewers from only one college and shortening another visit duration to half a day. A third visit was conducted by consultants only.

- Validation of college SARs was carried out.

- All participating colleges received a short, written report of suggested actions following visits.

Future plans

The intention of all four colleges in the phase two partnership was to sustain peer referencing activities beyond the pilot and work together over a longer period to implement and track changes. It was decided in future to avoid peer review visits between colleges which were in direct competition with each other.

3.4.3 'Professional accreditation' model

Landex Partnership

Participating colleges

Landex is a national federation of land-based colleges consisting of 30 member colleges in England and eight associate members in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Background

Landex, a recently incorporated federation of land-based colleges, is the successor body to Napaeo, which had been in existence for 50 years. Limited company status was achieved in 2006, at which point Landex took over all Napaeo's previous roles, including representation and advocacy for the sector. Landex also has a strong focus on developing self-regulation and driving up quality standards, and peer referencing will play a significant role within this agenda. Landex was invited to join the pilot project as representing a different approach to peer referencing within a self-regulation model.

Aims and objectives

The overall aims of Landex are to:

- present a professional voice on matters relating to land-based education and training to all relevant industry and statutory bodies

- ensure the sector is effectively represented on all relevant external bodies

- implement strong support measures including the sharing of good practice across most areas of organisation, management and delivery and to further enhance the quality of learning, performance and status of member colleges

- facilitate peer support to member colleges both in- and cross-region that has a CPD dimension and uses beacons, CoVEs and other networks to underpin the process

- implement a system of verifying quality that confirms that teaching and learning are of an appropriate high standard expected by learners and key agencies. This process will be centred on verification of college self-assessment procedures.

- promote distinctive and high-quality provision with the capacity to kite mark from member colleges

- ensure an effective response to demand as quantified through Sector Skills Agreements, including the necessary evidence of capacity and quality associated with these agreements

- work effectively with the Sector Skills Councils, in particular through the Lantra Sector Skills Partnership

- create enhanced opportunity for effective employer engagement.

Leadership and management

Implementation of the strategy for quality improvement and self-regulation was the responsibility of the Chief Executive and Director of Quality Improvement, who were both accountable to the Landex board of directors.

Funding and support

Landex is funded exclusively through its membership. There was no external funding for participation in the pilot, although there has been 'moral support' from various agencies including the Sector Skills Council (Lantra), the LSC and AoC.

Quality improvement activities

The main activities for 2006 were:

- establishing Landex as a company limited by guarantee

- recruiting the college membership

- appointing the Director for Quality Improvement to work with member colleges around quality issues. This post holder would be responsible for developing a quality improvement strategy and ensuring robust and accurate benchmarking of performance across the college membership

- organisation of CPD events for members on a range of issues including HE provision, residential provision and work based learning.

Key outcomes

- All the key aims and targets for 2006 were met.

- The Director of Quality Improvement conducted initial visits to all member colleges to identify areas of strength and weakness and priorities for quality improvement, which had informed development of the strategy.

- The quality improvement strategy was agreed and would focus on two key areas: the verification of college self-assessment procedures; and developing a programme of quality improvement for member colleges, acting both individually and collectively.

Future plans

In the coming year, the quality improvement strategy would be implemented and peer referencing activities would play a key role in peer observations and judgements on self-assessment processes; collaborative action to support quality

improvement; sharing good practice; and joint CPD events around themes of common interest.

3.5   Different models and approaches to peer referencing – a summary

3.5.1   Pilot partnerships

The eight partnerships varied according to factors such as history of formation, geographical location, number of participating colleges and types of provision. There were six regional and two national partnerships. Six partnerships were self-brokered; in two cases (South East and South West), the regional LSC had brokered the original partnerships.

Most of the partnerships were based on pre-existing collaborations, in which colleges had worked together on a range of strategies for quality improvement and sharing of good practice – such as validation of SARs, benchmarking and observations of teaching and learning. Interviews with pilot leaders and others indicated that this shared history could offer an advantage, by enabling partners to consolidate or formalise existing practice, or to 'move up to another level' with their collaborative activities. As a quality manager from one well-established group acknowledged, "We got off to a flyer". However, the two new partnerships, working together for the first time (South East and one of the East Midlands' groups), also proved to be effective in meeting their aims of establishing new regional provider networks and testing out peer referencing as a methodology for improving the robustness of their self-assessment processes.

Two partnerships represented collaborations of specialist providers: one (Landex), a federation of land-based providers, had recently achieved incorporation status, and the other (North West Independent Specialist Colleges) was a group of independent colleges offering specialist provision to students with a range of physical and/or learning disabilities. The other partnerships consisted of generalist FE colleges.

The largest partnership was Landex, which included 30 English colleges within its federation. The size of the other partnerships ranged from four to 12 colleges.

3.5.2   Project leadership and management

All the pilots were self-managed and no single model of leadership and management was prescribed.

Four pilots established steering groups, consisting typically of senior staff from the partner colleges and, in some cases, representation from external agencies. The role of the steering group could be advisory or more strategic in nature.

The majority of pilots also had an operational management group, typically consisting of senior college staff who directly managed the pilots on a day-to-day basis, and who were responsible for planning and monitoring progress towards meeting project outcomes.

Four of the pilots (East Midlands, League for Learning, North West, South East) nominated a lead college, whose role was usually to provide both overall co-ordination and administrative support.

A different model of project co-ordination was one in which the lead role was taken, to some extent, by an external organisation or individual. These external agencies included the regional LSC (South West phase one, NWISC); the local Learning Partnership (London South); and external consultants, accessed through the Learning and Skills Network (South West phase two, South East). In the Landex pilot, overall co-ordination was the responsibility of the federation's Chief Executive and Director of Quality Improvement, both accountable to the Landex Board of Directors.

3.5.3   Project funding and support

Only one pilot (East Midlands) secured funding from the regional LSC specifically for the pilot project. All the other pilots were self-funded, although the South West partnership had originally secured funding through the DfES Sharing Best Practice initiative and this had been used to support phase one activities. Two pilots (London South and South East), although not funded directly, received active support from their regional LSCs for such aspects as project co-ordination and administration costs. The London South project was supported in a similar way by the South London Learning Partnership. The Landex pilot was funded through college membership fees.

Three pilots (NWISC, South East and South West) also accessed support from external consultants from the Learning and Skills Network (LSN) who offered initial training and debriefing to peer reviewers and facilitated and supported other project activities.

Some of the pilots invited representatives from external agencies to attend steering group meetings and thus provide a degree of support in linking the pilot activities to wider strategic objectives. Steering group representatives came from the AoC, LSC, QIA and other organisations.

Some respondents reported that future plans for the continuation of peer referencing would include seeking funding, either through contributions from partner colleges, from the QIA, the LSC or from other sources. A number of issues relating to funding and resourcing of peer referencing activities were raised during interviews, and these are discussed in more detail in Section 5.1.

3.5.4   Staff engagement and development

There were variations across the pilots in terms of the make-up of their review teams. Some developed review teams which consisted of senior staff only and others engaged, or were planning to engage, staff at different levels and in different organisational roles, for example, senior and middle managers, human resource staff and teaching staff. However, most of the review visits that took place engaged with a wide range of staff within the host college. Only one pilot

(South East) restricted involvement to senior managers only, because of its focus on leadership and management.

A range of staff training and development activities took place across the pilots including:

- planning and briefing sessions for reviewers

- training in using standardised approaches to conducting observations and interviews

- large-scale initial training/awareness raising events for college staff across the partnership about peer referencing and what to expect from review visits

- 'on-the-job' training and development gained by staff through involvement in the peer referencing process.

Some pilots reported 'spin-off' staff development initiatives which had resulted from peer review activities.

3.5.5   Measures for benchmarking performance

All the pilots indicated that they were basing their peer review observations and judgements to some extent on the Common Inspection Framework (CIF). The use of this framework was considered appropriate, particularly for general FE colleges, as it is the standardised tool both for self-assessment and for external inspections.

One partnership (League for Learning) decided to make use of the EQFM Business Excellence Model in addition to the CIF, thus adding a dimension of business planning into the self-assessment process. The East Midlands Partnership aimed to include a focus on employer responsiveness by linking into the regional Emskills project. Some progress towards this was made, in that a model of peer referencing was developed which could verify provider self-assessment against the Emskills framework.

The Landex partnership was planning to develop a system of quality standards for benchmarking the performance of member colleges that would cover the full range of provision within the land-based sector, including HE and residential provision, and commercial activity. In the longer-term, one of the criteria for membership of the federation would be achievement of a quality kitemark based on evidence of meeting the sector's quality standards.

3.6   Engagement of learners and employers

Strategies for the involvement of learners and employers within the peer referencing process were still in the early stages of development within the majority of pilots. However, there was some evidence of 'promising practices' being developed in these areas by some of the partnerships. For example, a learner was included in the review team of one of the League for Learning peer review visits and the partnership decided to make this a standard practice in all its future peer reviews. Before the end of the pilot, the North West partnership had

plans well underway for a large-scale student survey to be carried out to benchmark learner opinions across the partner colleges. One of the colleges had also devised a development programme to encourage more students to become student representatives.

Other initiatives included:

- interviews with learners as part of the review process

- review of learner services on one of the review visits

- learners invited to attend a preparatory event for peer review visits

- employer representation on one pilot steering group

- involvement of employers within the review of a vocational curriculum area.

4 Strengths and successful outcomes from the peer referencing pilots

As indicated in the previous chapter, the evaluation identified a number of positive outcomes from the pilots, which will be discussed in the following sections.

4.1 Capacity for self-improvement

Evidence both from pilot self-evaluation reports and interviews with college staff indicated a strong sense that peer referencing has encouraged a 'culture of improvement' across partner institutions, linked to a more pro-active approach to quality improvement through networking, peer consultancy and other collaborative initiatives. Some respondents viewed this as symptomatic of a more widespread culture change across the sector, with a growing emphasis on partnership and co-operation:

> *Isolation and competition are ebbing away.*

> *I think there's much greater … willingness and understanding of the benefits of going and talking to other people, and working with like-minded people. So instead of being, you know, in open competition, just stuck in the silo of your own college, and not knowing any other way of doing things, I think that has changed. And I think it's been a considerable change in culture.*

Some felt that the willingness to become involved in peer referencing provided evidence of a college's commitment to improvement:

> *It's what it's all about really – peer referencing is a mechanism for challenging colleges to improve … it's about an attitude and commitment to improving quality and 'getting better'. Voluntary submission to external scrutiny and challenge provides evidence of this commitment.*

Interviews with pilot leaders and college staff provided various examples of collaborative strategies which had been generated by peer review activities and which were contributing to the capacity for improvement at the institutional level. The following sections present some examples from the pilots that are indicative of 'capacity to improve'.

4.1.1 Professional dialogue and 'communities of practice'

Many respondents referred to the encouragement of cross-institutional professional dialogue which had resulted from peer referencing. There had been a nurturing of new networks of practitioners at varying organisational levels and in different programme areas. Peer reviews had, in some cases, encouraged the development of ongoing and less formal contacts and visits between staff to share ideas on good practice. For example, two colleges in one partnership had developed a shadowing strategy for programme leaders; one review team leader was invited back after the review to assist with an organisational review.

One pilot self-evaluation report commented that:

> *The promotion of a sector-wide professional community based on the sharing of good practice is a real potential outcome of peer referencing.*

4.1.2 Improvement in self-assessment judgments and processes

The contribution of peer review to building colleges' capacity for self-assessment and facilitating improvements in self-assessment processes was another positive outcome for many pilot participants. The Quality Director in one college reported that the review visit had produced some particularly useful recommendations from peers in relation to the self-assessment report (SAR) writing as well as to their 'capacity to improve'. She felt that the review had "honed our skills in SAR writing" and had highlighted a need for staff development in this area. The college's participation in the pilot had been noted at a recent Ofsted inspection and had "gone down well" with the inspection team, who had been complimentary about the impact on self-assessment report writing. There were many other examples given of peer review visits and follow-up actions having provided useful evidence for Ofsted Annual Assessment Visits (AAVs) as well as full inspections.

It was pointed out that an important aspect of peer validation of SARs was that the process should be rigorous and challenging. For example, one college was challenged by the peer review team to prove that the activities they included in their self-assessment actually took place. They were unable to produce the required evidence, and this led to the implementation of new procedures to ensure that quality improvements were monitored and assessed. The college has also introduced external validation of their self-assessment process on a regular basis.

Another respondent gave an example of how the review team had challenged the information they had been given about student achievement because of a mismatch between their self-assessment and the written evidence provided:

> *… the department thought they were very good but actually the data was saying that they weren't and so we asked to look at the assessment practice there … and it seemed as though it was more about what they'd done with the data rather than the fact that the students weren't achieving … so I'd like to think that it helped them … .*

Some colleges were considered to be 'under-selling' themselves in their self-assessments and were encouraged to highlight their strengths as well as their weaknesses. At one college, self-assessment of Performing Arts was raised from grade 2 to grade 1 following peer review.

4.1.3 Collaborative strategies for supporting quality improvement

There were also indications from the research of some positive developments in collaborative strategies for supporting quality improvement, for example, through post-review feedback and ongoing support; attendance at partners' SAR validation events and AAVs; post-inspection improvement planning; and joint identification of training needs.

There was recognition in one pilot that members of the review team did not necessarily have all the answers to the problems identified in review visits and so an approach was developed which enabled them to draw on the wider pool of expertise within the partner colleges. A deliberate three-week gap was left between the review visit and submission of the review report, to allow time for the team to go back and gather information about how best practice within their own colleges could be used to support the recommended improvements.

Peer review was used in some of the pilots to support specific challenges faced by partner institutions, for example, a merger between two colleges in the East Midlands; in preparing for forthcoming Ofsted inspections or contributing to post-inspection improvement planning; and in addressing the challenge of college underachievement (this is discussed further in Section 5.4).

4.2   Accelerated quality improvement

The sharing of good practice between partners was a key aim of most of the pilots and some of the more established partnerships had a history of involvement in best practice sharing initiatives, usually across different curriculum areas.

For some respondents, reciprocal review visits provided a two-way process for exchanging useful ideas between both reviewers and reviewed. As one senior member of a review team commented:

> *… the strengths are two-way. First of all, the college that you're looking at hopefully benefits from … people coming in …. But the other side of it, that I think in many ways is just as valuable, is the benefit the reviewers get … I'm still using the information I got from … College … .*

Other methodologies for sharing good practice included the sharing and dissemination of ideas at workshops and other training events, and the ongoing professional dialogue developed between practitioners, managers etc. over the course of pilot activities.

In terms of the evidence the evaluation was able to identify about the impact of peer referencing on institutional practice, the following themes emerged:

● Improvement in the rigour and accuracy of self-assessment judgments and processes (as discussed in the previous section).

Impact on cross-institutional systems and practices:

● A direct impact on leadership and management in one college, contributing to a full institutional review process shortly after the peer review.

● Review of cross-college tutorial support after identifying good practice in another college.

● Investment in new resources for teaching and learning.

● Cross-curriculum initiative for raising success rates on level 1 courses.

Impact on specific curriculum areas:

- The foundation studies provision in one college had been rated as unsatisfactory by two inspection reports. Following peer review, this programme area had achieved a satisfactory rating in a subsequent inspection. A respondent from the college considered that the opportunity for open dialogue offered by peer review had helped them achieve the required improvements faster than they might otherwise have done.

- An internal review of the work-based learning strategy at one college as a direct result of peer review, including the development of two new development officer posts to monitor the training of apprentices and establish new contacts with employers.

- Changes to the process of staff recruitment in the hair and beauty department at one college.

Strategies for including the learner voice:

- In one review, learner views were incorporated through the student union, which enabled students to be more open about their comments. The findings from learner involvement had a direct impact on changes to learner support systems in the college.

- At another college, changes had been made to practices in the learner voice/student involvement strategy, such as inclusion of a learner representative on interview panels for new staff and a revamped student council. The self-assessment process had also been rewritten to secure greater student involvement in the process. These changes had all come as a direct result of observing similar practices in another college.

Impact at individual staff level:

- One quality manager reported feeling less isolated:

  Being a senior manager responsible for quality can be a lonely position … the opportunity to work collectively with peers and have their support has been very important … .

- A curriculum manager, who had been a member of a review team, reflected on the stimulating effect of going to observe different ways of working:

  … what I found was that it's really refreshing. Because you're … putting aside your own stuff and … thinking about someone else's problems and trying to help them see where it might be different … it was very reviving for me … .

4.3   Staff engagement and development

The staff development opportunities presented by involvement in peer referencing activities was identified by the majority of respondents as one of the key strengths of the pilot. Participants in the evaluation were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the benefits of practitioners from different institutions learning from each other:

[Peer referencing] can give practitioners more confidence in what they do. Practitioners can feel very isolated within their curriculum areas of delivery and provision. Seeing someone else do the same thing as you can really build confidence. Good practice sharing has opened curriculum staff to new approaches and enabled new networks and links to be established.

Peer referencing is the best form of professional staff development available … it gets people out of their comfort zones and helps drive up standards of learning and teaching … .

People are now queuing up for the review team. It has a morale-boosting effect – activities are highly practical as opposed to 'conference style' and you are literally coming back with stuff in your hand …. There are knock-on effects as team members come back enthusiastic and tell others about the good practice they've seen …. Those who line manage people on review teams get to see the benefits it's having … .

The benefits to those acting as reviewers were particularly highlighted, for example, in building observation and evaluation skills and in giving critical feedback. One respondent expressed the view that peer review was a more worthwhile staff development activity than attendance at conference because:

The skills involved are high level and evaluative, and the learning which takes place is active rather than passive.

According to the quality manager at another college:

I think it's some of the best staff development you can get when you go out and talk to colleagues … and I think we should do more of that.

However, other respondents felt that they had benefited from having their own curriculum areas reviewed, particularly where the reviewer had relevant subject expertise:

There were ideas planted in my mind, discussions we had about how things were done … one of the reviewers was a computing chap. So it was just great … for him to dig around into my area and see how we did things …. The informal feedback to me was great … I got lots of ideas from it of how to structure things slightly different here – things which I've implemented and things which I'm working on still.

An important factor for some respondents was the involvement of staff at different levels within the partner organisations in peer referencing activities, as this was more likely to have a direct impact on learners:

It's important to involve staff at all levels – senior managers are important but in terms of the learner journey, teaching and support staff are important too … .

These views emphasise the value of staff development through direct 'on-the-job' involvement in peer referencing activities, and again echo Cox's identification of 'active learning processes' as a key factor in facilitating effective sharing and transfer of good practice (Cox, 2006). As one quality manager commented, "Everyone is learning as they go".

While some respondents emphasised the value of staff development through 'on-the-job' experiential engagement in peer referencing activities, others raised the point that there was also a need for specific skills training for peer reviewers in areas such as observation skills, giving critical feedback, validating colleges' self-assessments and the benchmarking of performance. This point was closely linked to the need to establish the credibility of peer referencing with external agencies, and that it is capable of achieving a consistency of standard in conducting peer assessment across the sector.

According to one pilot leader, peer referencing contributed as much to staff development as it did to quality improvement. All the colleges involved in that particular partnership were planning to hold a conference in leadership and management development in the coming year, following common identification of a need to address this area.

5   Challenges to peer referencing

There were a number of challenges encountered by pilot participants, and some of the common ones raised during interviews are discussed in this chapter. The problems and challenges associated with peer referencing were discussed at a workshop organised by the QIA in March 2007. Some participants, while acknowledging the risks associated with peer review, pointed out that they had successfully developed strategies for overcoming these challenges or were planning to address them in future cycles of review visits. It was generally agreed that one of the useful functions of a pilot is to identify problems and to test out solutions.

5.1   Resources, funding and capacity issues

Firstly, there was the resource-intensive nature of the activity, particularly in terms of staff time and commitment. The difficulty most frequently raised in interviews was the pressure that peer referencing put on staff time and other institutional resources. For some respondents, the issue of their capacity to participate in the pilot was linked to the lack of funding available to support peer referencing activities, although others felt that the lack of external funding had had no impact.

Senior staff in many of the interviews were asked if they could provide an estimate of the costs of participation in the pilot project in terms of staff time. One project leader had calculated that it was necessary to allow for 20 to 25 days of staff time for each three-day review visit (which meant a total of 40 to 50 days per college in the partnership):

> It should be acknowledged that it's a costly exercise in terms of staffing – a review means three to four staff out of college for three days. Each review also requires a day's preparation.

Similar estimates of roughly 45 days of staff time were provided by other colleges participating in three-day reviews – this included time for preparation, meetings and induction training. One senior manager pointed out that the college had also received 30 days of free peer consultancy in return and that, in his view, this was a "reasonable trade-off". This point was echoed in other interviews. Members of another partnership considered that participation in the pilot activities had been 'cost-neutral' in terms of reviewer time donated and received between partners. There had been additional costs of project development meetings and overnight stays, but these were deemed to be 'minimal'.

When college managers were asked to consider the balance between costs and benefits, the general response was that the costs were far outweighed by the benefits received in terms of staff development, free peer consultancy, increased networking and quality improvements:

> It's brilliant staff development … it's an alternative to sending people out on staff development courses (and you often don't get what you want) … and to get that kind of consultancy – there would have been a cost to that … .

There were particular capacity issues faced by "small colleges with 'hands-on' principals" as a result of engaging in pilot activities, and one pilot leader reflected that they had been, perhaps, over-ambitious in the scope of their project, given the resources available.

Generally speaking, there had not been much in the way of staff cover required for pilot activities since the majority of staff involved had been senior managers who could work more flexibly than teaching staff working to timetables. However, some respondents raised the issue of 'hidden costs' at the individual level, for example, through senior staff adding the hours spent on peer referencing activities to their normal workload. A senior manager from a small independent college commented:

Staff time is the main demand. We have to juggle lots of tasks at the same time and often have to come away from the students to do project-related activities … usually staff simply have to be asked to re-programme their activities to fit the extra tasks in, but it means day-to-day responsibilities get pushed further and further down the line … .

Another respondent expressed concern about the implications for students where teaching staff had been involved in peer referencing:

… releasing staff for a day to participate in peer reviews puts a pressure on resources – it's been important to time visits to reduce impact on students.

As many of the partnerships expressed the intention of including a wider range of staff, including teaching staff, in future peer review activities, the potential impact on students and staff cover costs would need to be considered.

It was also considered important to address the issue of the capacity and resourcing of colleges to sustain peer referencing activities in the longer-term, particularly in view of the resource implications of developing the skills base required for peer referencing. There were concerns expressed that the high levels of costs and staff time might prove to be a disincentive for colleges and other providers less committed to the aims of peer referencing.

5.2 Project duration and other external pressures

Another issue, linked to the theme of resources, was the challenge, for some pilot participants, of meeting project outcomes within the allocated timescale. Some respondents felt that the short timescale of the project had presented a challenge, particularly in one case (Landex), where the development of peer referencing methodologies formed part of a longer-term plan for self-regulation across the partnership:

The … project is designed to be longer-term … most outcomes will be demonstrated well beyond the time schedule for the peer referencing pilots.

Some pilots had to face challenges from external events, for example, one review had to be rescheduled because the date clashed with an unexpected Ofsted inspection. Another college withdrew from the pilot in order to deal with merger

issues. Other unexpected events were reported to be AAV visits and staffing changes.

5.3 Balance between peer assessment and peer support

Section 3.2 of this report discussed definitions of peer referencing and referred to the QIA's view that it should be regarded as a cyclical process which incorporates both assessment- and development-focused activities. Findings from interviews indicated that this view was generally accepted by both project participants and stakeholders. However, there appeared to be differences of perspective with regard to where the emphasis should be placed within the peer referencing cycle.

For some, the focus of peer referencing should be more on the development of trust and peer support, and the learning acquired on the way:

> *Establishing trust between partners is important, especially in dealing with areas of under-performance – peer referencing is not just about benchmarking but also about colleges supporting each other … .*

> *It's not just about preparing for external inspection … it's about the learning experience of doing it and the learning journey rather than meeting targets … it needs to be an organic process … .*

For other respondents, the rigour in validating college self-assessments was the main priority and this point was often linked to the importance of establishing the credibility of the peer referencing process with external stakeholders. As one respondent commented:

> *… the key issue is the effectiveness of peer referencing in supporting rigorous self-assessment processes and ensuring that participating colleges are being sufficiently critical … evidence of the contribution of peer referencing to this process is the key issue … and the criterion by which the success of the pilots should be judged. Peer referencing should entail more than a friendly review and should have a hard edge … .*

One respondent identified the key challenge as striking the right balance between the 'softer' and 'harder' aspects of the peer referencing process:

> *… the challenge is establishing a common way of operating and standardisation of procedures to establish the credibility of peer referencing … standardised performance measure outcomes need to be balanced with the flexibility of approach that meets the needs of participants – over-regulation of the activity could adversely affect the developmental, dynamic character of peer referencing … .*

In relation to this, an emphasis was frequently placed on the distinction which should be made between peer referencing and inspection as two different processes requiring different approaches. Many respondents made reference to an 'inspection-plus' factor when reflecting on the particular ethos of peer referencing. For example, for one pilot leader, the interactive development of professional dialogue between practitioners lay at the heart of the peer referencing

process and this presented a contrast with external inspections, which were often experienced as "… a one-way process – something done to you …".

There is greater confidence and faith between professionals – good practice is identified through professional dialogue and this is key to the peer referencing process – this is an active, involved and developmental process in which there is a creative sharing of ideas.

This sentiment was echoed by another respondent:

Inspection is a managed and impressionistic process, whereas peer referencing is an open 'warts and all' reality … .

Interviews indicated that some review partners had experienced difficulties, particularly in the early stages, of getting this balance right. There was anecdotal evidence of some early peer reviews being more like 'mini-inspections' but this approach had not worked well. As one respondent (a quality director) explained, it had been a case of 'doing to' rather than 'doing with' and the giving and receiving of feedback on the final day had been a 'difficult and uncomfortable' experience. In later visits, the process had been revised to some extent and the decision was made to include 'internal reviewers' (usually programme managers with responsibility of SAR writing) in the review teams. "The aim was to redress the balance of power and create professional discussions around the SARs", and this approach had worked well.

Another respondent raised a similar point about the challenge to review teams of giving 'hard messages' to partners about areas of weakness, while at the same time giving feedback in a constructive way:

… because you don't want them to review the areas you're good at. You ask people to come and look at the problems – and you expect quite hard messages from some of these people … I think in [one] review there was an issue really with the tone of some of the reviewers. What I mean by that is some of the reviewers were overly carping … .

The respondent felt this raised the issue of a need to address the training and support needs of reviewers:

And I think what it's about really is some level of support and training for reviewers and clearly we'll get better as we go on … but it would be better, I think, if we did have a view on what kind of support and training reviewers would benefit from.

(There is further discussion of the attitude, skills and experience of reviewers in Section 6.5.)

On the other side of the 'balance' question, some respondents felt that there might be a risk in partnerships becoming too 'cosy' and insular if their membership remained static. In two of the pilots, a methodology had been adopted in which review teams were rotated at each visit specifically to avoid such cosiness

developing. The rationale for this approach was outlined in one of the partnership's self-evaluation reports:

> *Multilateral, rather than bilateral, relationships for peer review were used as the basis of the review process to create a robust and neutral peer review procedure. This structure explicitly ruled out reciprocal peer review arrangements and rotated reviewers annually. Each college received a reviewer from a different college every year and the same colleges would never review each other.*

Other pilot representatives discussed strategies for extending or rotating partnerships in future review cycles. The challenge, as more than one respondent commented, would be in achieving a balance between continuity and change across the partnerships.

5.4   Dealing with college underachievement

There was widespread recognition that peer referencing should demonstrate the capacity, not only to undertake rigorous peer assessments, but also to tackle difficult issues such as college under-performance. The former was reflected in a general tendency to focus on areas of acknowledged weakness within review visits, as well as the choice by some host colleges of themes such as 'moving from satisfactory to good' within certain curriculum areas. It was also apparent from some future partnership plans that there would be follow-up visits to monitor what corrective action might have been taken in line with peer review recommendations.

Another issue raised was the challenge presented by colleges which had been identified as 'failing':

> *One of the challenges is how to deal with under-performing and failing colleges – we have to maximise the partnership's potential to support a failing college currently being merged with one of the partners … .*

> *There's a challenge to peer referencing of how to deal with colleges in difficulties – peer referencing must have 'teeth' and robust procedures for dealing with these issues … .*

Two pilots shed some interesting light on the question of the potential role of peer referencing in addressing issues of colleges which are struggling or under-achieving.

- One college, which had been facing difficulties at the time of being reviewed, reported that the review visit had been challenging and rigorous in identifying areas of weakness, but had also facilitated professional dialogue about how improvements could be realised. Feedback from the review had included some very difficult messages but they felt this had made a positive contribution to more effective improvement planning. Two respondents, who had been members of the review team visiting the struggling college, reflected on the challenges faced by the reviewing organisations. For example, they felt that, because of the circumstances, there had been some constraints on how much they could offer in terms of follow-up and support, but also that a valuable level

of trust and openness had been achieved in dealing with some very sensitive issues. External validation of the college's subsequent progress has come in the form of an improved inspection grade of a programme area rated as unsatisfactory in two previous inspections. The peer review visit was considered to have made a significant contribution to this improvement.

- Another pilot, faced with the challenge of supporting a 'failing' college in the process of merging with one of the partner colleges, made use of a peer review visit to offer additional support for preparation of the college's Post Inspection Action Plan.

6   Critical success factors

One of the key aims of the evaluation was to identify the 'critical success factors' for establishing effective peer relationships at both institutional and individual levels. Interviews with pilot participants explored their perceptions on the key factors contributing to successful outcomes from peer referencing and the following sections outline the main themes from these findings.

6.1   The nature and values of peer referencing partnerships

Despite the diversity of the partnerships, there was a considerable degree of consensus among participants around the benefits of colleges working together towards improving the quality of provision and the way that this had stimulated professional dialogue, both at a more formal organisational level and at a less formal personal level. This was considered an important factor, particularly in view of the risks presented by potential competition between partners. One respondent from a partnership working together for the first time felt that one of the benefits for her had been the increased communication and informal networking resulting from the pilot:

> *It's meant that we 'phone one another up about things and we'd never had any communication before. Can I just say that we didn't know one another at all so there was no relationship … so there's a lot of spin-off in terms of co-operation, collaboration with other things. Because you feel confident that you can work with those people.*

There was a remarkable degree of (unprompted) similarity in the terminology used by respondents in describing their experience of this collaborative approach, emphasising, in particular, the need for openness, honesty and trust in the peer relationship, for example:

> *You need openness and honesty to share and understand good practice.*

> *… openness between colleges, willingness to share, support each other and accept critical feedback … .*

> *Building trust is important because through this work colleges have to expose their practice.*

> *… supportive collaboration – open exchange of ideas, even with direct competitors.*

> *… working with a co-operative group of partners who are willing to share without regarding each other as competitors … .*

On the other hand, where some unwillingness to share information had been reported, this was seen to have a negative impact on project outcomes:

> *You need colleges to be open and honest about the bad as well as the good.*

The experience of some partners reinforced the importance of trust being established at all levels within the institution:

> *The trust established at practitioner level was not always reflected in college policy and in two groups there was some resistance to sharing SARs.*

Effective partnership was also considered to depend on a sense of equality and reciprocity. Although some colleges were judged through external assessments to be performing more successfully than others, data from the interviews indicated the importance of all partners being willing to learn from each other whatever their status:

> *… ensuring equity in terms of everyone gaining something from the process – it's not a one-way relationship.*

> *It's essential that it's seen as a partnership – a partnership of peers. It's not a one-way process of those deemed stronger telling the weaker ones how to do it.*

> *… equal involvement, equal status and ownership of the project by all participants … .*

There were a couple of interesting illustrations from interviews of how the reciprocal nature of peer relationships could cut across more formal differences of status, relating particularly to the status of some partners as 'Beacon' colleges. One respondent who had worked alongside a Beacon college during the pilot felt strongly that this had made no difference to the reciprocal nature of the partnership and that "… all colleges have taken on board what's been said".

Another senior manager from a Beacon college described their involvement with the academic recovery strategy of a partner college, which at the time was in special measures, and how, through this process, they had picked up some good practice points that they were planning to customise to their own needs.

6.2   Commitment and reliability

An active commitment to the partnership and a willingness to 'sign up' to collectively agreed protocols and procedures for conducting peer review emerged as another key factor for success. This was particularly important because of the voluntary nature of the pilot project.

Reliability was another valued quality in partners, or as one pilot self-evaluation report put it:

> *Doing what you said you are going to do.*

A senior manager in one interview had been impressed by the reliability of the partnership and the fact that:

> *We never let each other down.*

Another respondent reflected that the key feature for her had been a shared practical approach to peer referencing and an attitude of "just getting on with it" rather than spending a lot of time having meetings or theorising about the process:

It will only work if there's trust. It will only work also if you're prepared to just go and do it. And what's nice about this project is … it was a doing project, it wasn't about sitting around having meetings, talking in theory about these things … .

6.3   Establishment of clear protocols

On the other hand, there was general agreement that a certain amount of preparation was essential, particularly in the early stages of each pilot, in order to establish a common understanding of the peer review process and to agree protocols and procedures.

Most of the pilots had developed common documentation for conducting reviews and these could include:

- memorandums of agreement (usually produced by the host college, which outlined the focus of the review and their expectations of how the review would be conducted)

- schedules for the observation of teaching and learning

- reflective diaries to be kept by reviewers

- feedback and evaluation forms etc.

Samples of this documentation can be found in Appendix 2.

Exchanges of relevant information and data prior to review visits were also considered desirable. As reviewers would be required to absorb a great deal of information in a short space of time, there was an emphasis on the importance of being as well prepared as possible. One reviewer outlined what she had expected to receive from the host college in order to be able to make informed judgements about the self-assessment process in the curriculum area to be reviewed:

… we were sent overview positioning statements – we wanted to know what this meant: where was maths and science, what department does it sit in, how many learners are there etc? … so the draft SAR, the previous year's action plan because that's crucial, and the monitoring document in terms of where the action plan was going … .

In return, the reviewing colleges might send professional profiles of members of the review team.

6.4   Leadership and the commitment of senior staff

As discussed earlier, all the pilots were self-managed and no overarching system of leadership and management had been recommended or prescribed. Chapter 3 of this report provides an outline of the different models of leadership and

management of the pilots, ranging from highly structured approaches with co-ordinators, steering groups and operational management groups to looser and less hierarchical 'committee' structures. Evidence from pilot outcomes and from interviews does indicate that a lack of clear definition of leadership roles and responsibilities within some of the pilots may have contributed to their relatively slower progress. Although this finding does not indicate that a standardised model of management should be prescribed for peer referencing, it does suggest that the setting up of clear structures and lines of accountability are likely to make a significant contribution to developing effective peer relationships. This point was reinforced by comments from respondents:

Strategic leadership is required to drive the agenda forwards.

There's a need for clear leadership to ensure things happen and that activities are monitored consistently.

In some of the pilots, principals and senior managers took a prominent and 'hands on' role in leading and managing peer referencing activities, and this was obviously advantageous. Where there was less direct involvement from senior staff, it was seen by participants as crucial that there should be commitment and support from staff at senior levels within participating colleges if the pilot outcomes were to be successfully achieved. For some respondents, the support of principals and other senior staff was critical for maintaining the momentum of the peer referencing initiative and giving it credibility within the organisation:

College principals have shown enthusiasm for the initiative and see it as a useful vehicle for management development and sharing good practice … .

They [senior managers] can sanction activity, help make sure things happen and add credibility to the implementation.

6.5　Attitude, experience and skills of reviewers

The success of peer referencing was also critically dependent on the attitudes and skills of reviewers and review teams. There were some cases reported in interviews of problems arising where reviewers had taken too 'inspectorial' an approach or had not given feedback in a constructive way (see Section 5.3). This raises the question of whether some 'minimum standards' of reviewer skills and competence could be introduced at some time in the future.

Another problem raised was the issue of an imbalance of skills and experience between different review teams. For example, respondents from one college felt that they had sent more skilled and experienced staff to act as reviewers and therefore had given more to other colleges than they got back. It was pointed out that some colleges might have stronger internal processes for developing staff skills, for example, in lesson observation. Although this mismatch or uneven distribution of skills could be a problem, some pilots were already beginning to address this challenge through joint initiatives to develop standardised approaches to lesson observation across the partnership.

Interviews with college managers indicated that in putting together review teams, it was often a case of drawing on the existing skills and expertise of staff, for

example, with particular subject specialisms or previous experience as inspectors. However, it was also important to continue to widen the network of people who could act as reviewers and to collectively identify the training needs required.

There was an emphasis in many interviews on an experiential approach to reviewer training and the development of skills while 'on the job', for example, through mentoring or shadowing of more experienced reviewers. However, more formal reviewer training was offered on some pilots, usually in the form of initial training sessions before conducting peer review visits. Some pilots had drawn on the services of external consultants to facilitate reviewer training and were very positive about the contribution this had made to 'making things happen'.

6.6 Geographical considerations

Although both regional and national partnerships could be seen to have operated effectively in the pilot, the need to take geographical factors into account was frequently raised during interviews. There appeared to be two key issues: the risk of competition arising from too close a proximity to partner institutions on the one hand, and the logistical difficulties and additional costs associated with geographical distance, on the other.

Some pilot leaders (both regional and national) stated that a key aim in selecting partners to work with had been avoidance of direct institutional competition:

> *It was envisaged that being sufficiently geographically dispersed, colleges would be able to enter into a truly collaborative process without the impediment of a 'competitive market' that could be presented by a locally based college initiative.*[1]

This view was echoed in many other interviews. For example, in one pilot, there had been a 'forced marriage' between two geographically close colleges who regarded each other as direct competitors. The relationship had not worked well and was unlikely to continue in future review cycles.

However, too great a distance between partners was viewed by many as another potential disadvantage. For example, it was suggested that the added costs of travel and accommodation could discourage the formation of more widely dispersed partnerships.

Some logistical problems had been experienced in one pilot, in which partner colleges were scattered across a wide region, and an earlier evaluation had concluded:

> *The very wide geographical dispersion of the partnership colleges has not aided face-to-face contact … .*

All these different experiences highlight the importance of taking geographical factors into account in setting up peer relationships.

[1]   Foster H (2006), Evaluation of the League for Learning Self-Regulation Pilot Project, The Research Centre, City College Norwich.

7 Sustainability and future developments

7.1 Future plans for peer referencing

All the pilot partnerships expressed the intention of continuing with some form of peer referencing after the end of the project. For the Landex project, in particular, participation in the pilot was part of a longer-term strategy for developing self-regulation in the land-based sector, and this work was planned to continue well beyond the completion of the pilots.

As discussed earlier, some of the continuing projects planned to make some changes to the partnerships to avoid them becoming too 'insular' or 'cosy'. Changes would include rotation of partnership groupings and the expansion of partnerships to include more partners, such as work-based learning providers.

Some respondents expressed the intention of expanding review teams in future peer review cycles to include a wider range of staff including principals, governors (where possible), programme managers, teaching staff etc. Some partnerships were also devising strategies for more active inclusion of the learner voice within the peer review process.

Some partnerships, in their self-evaluation reports, indicated that they would be making use of the Framework for Excellence as the basis for validation of self-assessments in future peer review cycles. Linked to this development, there were also plans to include additional cross-college themes, such as the learner voice, employer engagement and value for money.

7.2 The role of external agencies

7.2.1 External support and brokerage of peer referencing partnerships

Many project participants commented on the positive support they had received from agencies such as the QIA, LSC, AoC and others over the course of the pilot project, for example, through:

- organisation by QIA of review and development workshops for project teams and key stakeholders

- representation on the national steering group and on some regional pilot steering groups

- involvement of regional LSCs in some pilots, for example, brokering partnerships, overview of activities, and facilitating meetings

- direct funding of one pilot by the regional LSC

- guidance and facilitation provided by external consultants

- provision of support at strategic level by helping drive forward the agenda for self-improvement and self-regulation, for example, through the national steering group for the peer referencing pilots, co-ordinated by QIA.

There were a number of suggestions about the continuing role for external agencies in supporting and facilitating peer referencing in the longer-term. Most respondents held the view that the QIA should continue to play a facilitative and supportive role in the future development of peer referencing, for example:

- through acting as a "brokering agency – putting providers in touch with each other"

- by providing advice, guidance and consultancy, particularly for those colleges and partnerships which were new to the process

- as part of its role in providing strategic direction for quality improvement to the sector as a whole and in supporting specific peer referencing initiatives.

It is worth noting that some of the pilot partnerships were already accessing QIA funding streams (such as Support for Success, Train to Gain and Beacon Innovation Funding) in order to continue and extend their peer referencing activities. In addition, QIA were planning to launch a major new programme (Support for Excellence) before the end of the year, which would extend peer referencing to other parts of the further education system including providers in work-based learning, adult and community learning and voluntary and community organisations.

Although, strategically, the LSC was considered to have a less direct role in quality improvement and the development of peer referencing, it was seen to have an ongoing interest in the contribution of peer referencing to more effective self-assessment across its funded provision. Also, some respondents commented that, because of its regional structure, the LSC was well placed to continue to support peer referencing activities through the brokerage of new partnerships, access to consultancy services, facilitation of meetings and ongoing support and encouragement.

For at least one project participant, there were tensions around the involvement of external agencies in the self-regulation and quality improvement agenda and suspicions that this would lead to a 'top down' approach:

If colleges are to improve their quality they need to have ownership of the process, for the process to be driven from the bottom up. Ministers, LSC, QIA are all trying to put pressure on FE to change but their interference risks losing colleges their autonomy … .

7.3   Encouraging wider participation across the sector

A number of issues and concerns about the sustainability of peer referencing beyond the pilots were raised in interviews with both project participants and stakeholders. As identified earlier, one of the main issues was the resource-intensive nature of peer referencing activities, which raised concerns about its

viability in the future. There was a broad acceptance that, ultimately, peer referencing would be paid for by the sector itself, but in the shorter-term, many felt that some form of 'pump-priming' funding could be made available to facilitate the development of further peer partnerships across the sector.

Another potential barrier to the further development of peer referencing was an anticipated lack of commitment from some colleges and providers. It was acknowledged that currently peer referencing was being carried out by "a small group of enthusiastic volunteers" and the challenge was to 'sell' the concept to other colleges and providers:

> *Some might be reluctant because of perceived costs or lack of willingness to subject themselves to peer assessment. There may be other colleges which have already achieved a high level of quality and felt there was nothing further to be gained from participating in peer referencing relationships.*

One stakeholder felt that the key to the inclusion of 'high performing' colleges, such as those with Beacon status, was to encourage "a sense of reciprocity" and to put across the idea that "all participants have something to gain".

Despite these challenges, the interviews, both with pilot participants and stakeholders, generally conveyed a sense of optimism and enthusiasm about the future of peer referencing within the broader context of self-regulation. The pilot project, although small in scale, has represented a significant cultural shift in the history of the further education system:

> *We're at a crucially important stage and the success of the pilots will be vital in taking this vision forward. The pilots are a bit of the future in operation.*

8　Conclusions and recommendations

8.1　Review of evaluation aims and objectives

The main aims of this evaluation were to assess the outcomes of the national peer referencing pilot projects, to understand more effectively the processes involved in peer referencing and to make recommendations on how peer referencing could be further developed to support self-improvement and self-regulation within the further education system. While it was clearly the case that some pilots made further progress than others in developing and putting into practice peer referencing methodologies within the timeframe of the project, this evaluation report has continued to take into account the developmental aspects of the project as a whole, as well as the different starting points and 'distance travelled' by the pilot partnerships.

A brief review follows of the primary and secondary aims of the evaluation with key findings and conclusions summarised under each heading.

8.1.1　Primary aims of the evaluation

- The usefulness of different models and approaches to peer referencing:

  This evaluation confirms the view that peer referencing can most usefully be viewed as a cyclical process which should incorporate both peer assessment and peer improvement functions. The dominant model developed within the pilots, centred around the organisation of a cycle of review visits, offers a flexible model which can be adapted to a range of different contexts and purposes.

- The critical success factors for establishing effective peer relationships:

  The main success factors identified were: the nature and values of peer referencing partnerships; the establishment of clear protocols and procedures; robust leadership and management; commitment of senior staff; attitudes, experience and skills of reviewers; and geographical considerations.

- The degree to which pilot projects have accelerated quality improvement and enhanced the capacity to improve across partner institutions:

  The evaluation identified evidence of the positive impact of peer referencing partnerships and activities on the institutional capacity to improve, accelerated quality improvement and staff development.

- The transferability of good practice in peer referencing to other parts of the further education system:

  A number of examples of good practice and 'what works' in peer referencing have been identified throughout this evaluation report, which have potential for transfer to other parts of the sector. These include:

- the development and testing of dynamic, flexible models of peer referencing which can be adapted for a range of different contexts and purposes

- the development of a common core of peer referencing processes, including elements of both peer assessment and peer support

- identification of the core values required for the establishment of effective peer relationships

- the development of a range of protocols, methodologies and documentation for conducting peer reviews

- identification of the skills and training required by peer reviewers.

8.1.2   Secondary objectives of the evaluation

- The development of training, communication materials and other documentation designed to support pilot activities:

  A range of materials and documentation were developed by the pilot partnerships including: memorandums of agreement; reviewer profiles, role descriptions and guidelines; reflective diaries for reviewers; observation schedules; evaluation sheets; and evaluation report pro formas etc. Examples of some of these materials can be found in Appendix 2.

- Incorporation of the learner voice/engagement of employers in the peer referencing process:

  The evaluation concluded that strategies for the involvement of learners and employers in the peer referencing process were still in the early stages of development within the majority of pilots. However, there was some evidence of 'promising practices' being developed in these areas by some of the partnerships, such as: including learners and employers within review teams; conducting interviews and surveys with learners as part of the review process; employer representation on project steering groups etc. Such strategies for incorporation of the learner voice and employer engagement were featuring more strongly in the future plans of some of the partnerships.

- Identify any equality and diversity issues:

  There was no evidence from the evaluation about the contribution of peer referencing to equality and diversity, either among the staff or student profiles of participating colleges.

- Assess how effectively technology can support the collaborative networks:

There was little evidence from the evaluation about the contribution of technology, beyond standard usage (for example, email) between partners.

● Assess the relationship demonstrated in the pilots between self-evaluation and external evaluation and how the two can best complement each other:

All the projects were required to submit three progress reports and a final self-evaluation report to the QIA, which were made available to the external evaluation. This ongoing reporting and feedback was helpful to the external evaluation process, for example, by enabling the research team to triangulate evidence gathered from other sources and to monitor progress over the course of the project. There has been a reasonably high degree of consistency between both forms of evaluation.

● Record any resource and funding issues and their impact on the pilots:

Issues of resources, funding and pressures on staff time were identified as posing a major challenge to the peer referencing partnerships. However, the costs of peer referencing were generally considered to be outweighed by the benefits.

● Identify any regional factors in the performance and nature of the individual pilots:

Both regional and national partnerships operated effectively within the pilot. However, the need to take geographical factors into account when setting up partnerships was frequently raised during interviews.

The following conclusions summarise and draw out some of the key messages which emerged from the project as a whole, and consider their implications in terms of the future direction of peer referencing and its contribution to the wider agenda for quality improvement and self-regulation. The conclusions also aim to reflect the main issues and concerns raised by project participants and stakeholders during interviews.

8.2   Peer referencing models and approaches

8.2.1   Common core of peer referencing processes

There was evidence from across the pilot projects of a common commitment to different aspects of the peer referencing process, and to the inclusion of the elements of both peer assessment and peer support. On the whole, project aims reflected the key elements identified by the QIA as central to the peer referencing process, that is: the benchmarking of performance using agreed performance measures; the validation of self-assessment judgements and processes; the identification of strengths, areas for improvement and action plans to address these; the sharing and transfer of good practice; and collaborative working to support improvement activities. However, there were differences between the pilots in the extent to which emphasis was placed on assessment or development focused activities, depending on factors such as the requirements of the college under review and the wider strategic aims of the partnership.

The majority of pilots developed a common core of peer referencing activities, centred around a cycle of review visits to each partner college, although there were variations within this broad commonality of approach. For some projects the focus of attention was on the performance of the whole college, including its capcity for improvement. Such 'whole organisational' models may offer useful prototypes for developing peer referencing to support self-regulation. Other projects took a more thematic approach, focusing on discrete areas of college provision, such as performance in particular curriculum or service areas, employer responsiveness, or the quality of leadership and management. The project also demonstrated how a model of peer referencing could be developed for professional accreditation purposes.

As the pilot projects were self-managed and mainly self-funded, it is not surprising that there was such a wide range of project focus, aims and activities. However, the emergence of a broad consensus around a common core of peer referencing values and processes is a significant finding, and one which could provide a useful baseline for the further development of peer referencing initiatives across the further education system.

8.2.2 Diversity of the partnerships

The eight partnerships varied according to factors such as history of formation, geographical location, number of participating colleges, types of provision, structures of leadership and management, levels of external support, and types of peer review activities engaged in. This diversity has offered opportunities to assess the impact of a range of different factors on the establishment of effective peer relationships. Since the longer-term aim is to extend peer referencing to include other providers from the work-based learning, adult, and community and voluntary sectors, and also to develop cross-sectoral partnerships, then diversity is likely to remain a key feature of peer referencing models and activities.

8.3   Strengths and successful outcomes of peer referencing pilots

The evaluation identified a number of significant strengths and successful outcomes from the pilots, which are summarised below.

8.3.1 Capacity to improve

Findings indicated a strong sense that peer referencing has encouraged a 'culture of improvement' across partner institutions as well as a more pro-active approach to quality improvement through networking, peer consultancy and other collaborative initiatives.

These strategies were leading to positive results in terms of the development of professional dialogue and 'communities of practice'; improved rigour and accuracy of self-assessment processes; providing evidence for Ofsted inspections and AAVs; and supporting specific challenges such as mergers, inspections and college underachievement. There were also indications of positive developments in collaborative strategies for supporting quality improvement, for example through post-review feedback and ongoing support; attendance at partners' SAR validation

events and AAVs; post-inspection improvement planning; and joint identification of training needs.

8.3.2 Accelerated quality improvement

The sharing of good practice between institutions was a key aim for all the pilots and, for many participants, reciprocal review visits provided a two-way process for exchanging useful ideas between both reviewers and reviewed. Other methodologies for sharing good practice included the sharing and dissemination of ideas at workshops and other training events, and the ongoing professional dialogue developed between practitioners, managers etc. over the course of pilot activities.

The impact of peer referencing on organisational practice was evidenced through improvements in self-assessment processes; cross-institutional systems and practices; specific curriculum areas; strategies for engaging learners; and impact at individual staff level.

8.3.3 Professional development of staff

The staff development opportunities presented by involvement in peer referencing activities was identified by the majority of respondents as one of the key strengths of the pilot. Participants in the evaluation were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the advantages of practitioners from different institutions learning from each other.

The benefits to those acting as reviewers were particularly highlighted. While some respondents emphasised the value of staff development through 'on-the-job' experiential engagement in peer referencing activities, others raised the point that there is also a need for specific skills training for peer reviewers in areas such as observation skills, giving critical feedback, validating colleges' self-assessments, and the benchmarking of performance. This point was frequently linked to the self-regulation agenda and the need to establish the credibility of peer referencing as a robust tool for achieving consistent standards of peer assessment across the sector.

8.4 Challenges to peer referencing

There were a number of challenges and problems encountered by pilot participants, although it was pointed out that various strategies were being developed for addressing these.

8.4.1 Resources, funding and capacity issues

Pressures on staff time and other institutional resources was the issue most frequently raised in relation to project risks and challenges, and these were sometimes linked to lack of external funding available to support partnerships. However, the general view was that costs were far outweighed by the benefits received in terms of staff development, free peer consultancy, increased networking and quality improvements.

There were particular capacity issues faced by small colleges in terms of the commitment required by senior staff to the project, whereas larger institutions were probably able to absorb these demands more easily. However, there was also the issue of 'hidden costs' at the individual level, through senior staff adding the hours spent on peer referencing work to their normal workload.

Time pressures had also been experienced by some pilot participants in terms of meeting project outcomes within a relatively short timescale. This suggests that there might be a tension between the organic nature of peer referencing and the time required to establish effective peer relationships on the one hand, and the requirements of meeting the specific outcomes of a short-term project on the other.

Some pilots had faced challenges from events external to the project including an Ofsted inspection and a college merger.

It was considered important to address the issue of the capacity and resourcing of colleges to sustain peer referencing activities in the longer-term, particularly in view of the resource implications of developing the skills base required for peer referencing. There were concerns expressed that the high levels of costs and staff time might prove to be a disincentive for colleges and other providers less committed to the aims of peer referencing.

8.4.2 Achieving a balance between peer assessment and peer support

There appeared to be some differences of perspective between pilots with regard to whether the emphasis should be placed more on peer assessment or peer support. For some, the focus should be more on the development of trust and peer support, while others regarded rigour in validating college self-assessments as the main priority. One respondent identified the key challenge as striking the right balance between the 'softer' and 'harder' aspects of the peer referencing process. Some review partners had experienced difficulties in the early stages of getting this balance right and in giving 'hard messages' to partners in a constructive way.

Many respondents emphasised the distinction which should be maintained between peer referencing and external inspection as two different processes. Some made reference to an 'inspection-plus' factor when reflecting on the particular ethos of peer reviews, and contrasted the interactive development of professional dialogue between practitioners with external inspections, which were often experienced as more of a 'one way process'.

In connection with this point, there is an emerging view from QIA and other organisations involved in peer-to-peer working that the term 'peer referencing' fails to reflect the developmental, improvement-orientated nature of this work and that the term 'peer review and development' might be more appropriate.

8.4.3 Continuity and change in peer relationships

Another issue of 'balance' was raised in relation to the potential risks of partners becoming too 'cosy' and insular if their membership remained static. In two pilots, a methodology had been adopted in which review teams were rotated at each visit

in order to avoid such cosiness developing. Other pilots had plans for extending or rotating partnerships in future review cycles, but would aim to achieve a balance between continuity and change.

8.4.4 Dealing with college underachievement

There was widespread recognition that peer referencing should demonstrate the capacity to tackle issues of college underachievement in general, as well as the particular difficulties faced by colleges which are deemed to be 'failing'. The former was reflected in a general tendency to focus on areas of acknowledged weakness within review visits, as well as the choice by some host colleges of themes such as 'moving from satisfactory to good' within certain curriculum areas. Also, most projects had made arrangements to monitor the impact of joint action plans after completion of the project.

Two pilots shed some interesting light on the potential role of peer referencing in supporting struggling colleges, for example, through identification of areas of weakness, facilitating professional dialogue about how improvements could be realised and offering ongoing support with post-inspection planning. A peer review visit, which took place within one of the pilots, was considered to have made a significant contribution to later improvement in the inspection grade of one struggling college.

8.5 Critical success factors

8.5.1 Nature of peer referencing partnerships

Despite the diversity of the partnerships, there was a considerable degree of consensus among participants around the benefits of colleges working together towards improving the quality of provision and the way that this had stimulated professional dialogue, both at a more formal organisational level and at a less formal personal level. There was a remarkable degree of similarity in the terminology used by respondents in describing their experience of this collaborative approach, emphasising, in particular, the need for openness, honesty and trust in the peer relationship.

Effective partnership was also considered to depend on a sense of equality and reciprocity. Although some colleges were judged through external assessments to be performing more successfully than others, it was generally felt that all partners should be willing to learn from each other, whatever their status.

Reliability and an active commitment to the partnership and a willingness to 'sign up' to a collectively agreed approach to conducting peer review also emerged as key factors for success.

8.5.2 Establishment of clear protocols and procedures

There was general agreement that a certain amount of preparation was essential, particularly in the early stages of each pilot, in order to establish a common understanding of the peer review process and to agree protocols and procedures. Most of the pilots had developed common documentation for conducting reviews.

Exchange of relevant information and data prior to review visits was also considered desirable. As reviewers would be required to absorb a great deal of information in a short space of time, there was an emphasis on the importance of being as well prepared as possible.

8.5.3   Robust leadership and management

All the pilots were self-managed and no overarching system of leadership and management had been recommended or prescribed. There were different models of leadership and management across the pilots, ranging from highly structured approaches with co-ordinators, steering groups and operational management groups to looser and less hierarchical 'committee' structures. There was some evidence that a lack of clear definition of leadership roles and responsibilities within some of the pilots may have contributed to their relatively slower progress. This finding suggests that the setting up of clear structures and lines of accountability are likely to make a significant contribution to developing effective peer relationships.

8.5.4   Commitment of senior staff

In some of the pilots, principals and senior managers took a prominent and 'hands on' role in leading and managing peer referencing activities, and this was obviously advantageous. Where there was less direct involvement from senior staff, it was seen by participants as crucial that there should be commitment and support from staff at senior levels, particularly from principals, if the pilot outcomes were to be successfully achieved. In some pilots there were indications that a lack of senior management 'buy-in' had impacted negatively on project progress. Senior level support was viewed as particularly important for giving credibility to the aims of the pilot, for driving forward the agenda for peer referencing and linking it to the longer-term strategic aims of the institution.

8.5.5   Attitude, experience and skills of reviewers

The success of peer referencing was also critically dependent on the attitudes and skills of reviewers and review teams. There were some cases reported in interviews of problems arising where reviewers had taken too 'inspectorial' an approach or had not given feedback in a constructive way.

Although a mismatch or uneven distribution of reviewer skills between partner colleges could be a problem, some pilots were already beginning to address this challenge through joint initiatives to develop standardised approaches, for example, in lesson observation.

Interviews with college managers indicated that, in putting together review teams, it was often a case of drawing on the existing skills and expertise of staff, for example, with particular subject specialisms or previous experience as inspectors. However, it was also important to continue to widen the network of people who could act as reviewers, and to collectively identify the training needs required.

8.5.6   Geographical considerations

Although both regional and national partnerships could be seen to have operated effectively in the pilot, the need to take geographical factors into account was frequently raised during interviews. There appeared to be two key issues: the risk of competition arising from too close a proximity to partner institutions on the one hand, and the logistical difficulties and additional costs associated with geographical distance on the other. The different experiences of pilot participants indicated that geographical factors should be taken into consideration when setting up peer relationships.

8.6   Sustainability and future developments

8.6.1   Next steps for pilot partnerships

All projects expressed the intention of continuing involvement in peer referencing partnerships after the end of the pilots. Some continuing projects planned to make changes to the partnerships, for example: rotation of partnership groupings or expansion of partnerships to include a wider range of providers. In some cases there were plans to expand the range of themes to be explored on peer review visits.

8.6.2   The role of external agencies

The main external agencies to be involved in the pilot project (QIA, LSC, AoC) made a significant contribution in a number of ways, for example representation on national and regional steering groups, brokering partnerships, supporting and funding pilots, and providing support at a strategic level etc. There was a general consensus among project participants and stakeholders that these key agencies should have a continuing role in supporting and facilitating peer referencing in the longer-term.

8.6.3   Encouraging wider participation across the sector

A number of concerns were raised about the future sustainability of peer referencing, including the high costs and resource-intensive nature of peer referencing activities, and the possible lack of commitment from some colleges and other providers. Despite these challenges, there was general enthusiasm and optimism expressed about the future of peer referencing and its key contribution to quality improvement and self-regulation in the sector.

8.7   Evaluation recommendations

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

It is recommended that:

1. The findings of this evaluation be accepted as evidence of the utility of peer referencing in supporting the capacity of colleges to self-improve and to self-regulate their own affairs.

2. Steps be taken to embed peer referencing within the mainstream review and development activities of FE colleges and other learning providers through appropriate forms of funding and support, and through links to other external review processes.

3. The purposes of peer referencing as developed through the pilots and articulated in QIA briefing papers, be accepted as the basis for undertaking future peer referencing work.

4. A set of core values and common protocols be developed by QIA, drawing on the critical success factors for peer referencing, to support further developments in this area of work.

5. Within a defined national framework (based on 3 and 4 above), peer referencing should be developed flexibly to meet the diverse needs and circumstances of providers from across the further education system.

6. In considering different models of peer referencing, a distinction be made between whole organisational reviews, thematic reviews on discrete aspects of provision, and reviews used for professional accreditation purposes.

7. In establishing peer referencing partnerships a variety of factors should be considered including: current or previous forms of collaboration, organisational mission and values, comparative performance, geographical location, the focus of review activity, availability of external funding and support, and optimum size of the peer referencing group.

8. Good practice in peer referencing, as developed over the course of the pilots, be consolidated by QIA into 'peer referencing toolkits' and good practice guidelines.

9. Whilst recognising the professional development function of peer review, further work be undertaken to define the skills base necessary for effective peer referencing and the national standards that might be developed to support this.

10. The findings of the evaluation should be disseminated widely to providers across the further education system in order to promote a better understanding of how peer referencing can be used to improve organisational and staff performance.

11. A new term should be adopted to more adequately reflect both the assessment and improvement functions of this work. QIA has proposed the term 'peer review and development' for this purpose.

12. The major national bodies, including QIA, LSC, Ofsted and the provider representative bodies, should work closely together to further develop the policy and practice of peer review and development as part of moves towards a more self-regulating sector.

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Appendix 1: What is Peer Referencing?

This section is an extract from a briefing paper by the QIA, *'Peer referencing, self-improvement and self- regulation within the learning and skills sector'* (Cox 2006).

What is peer referencing?

Peer referencing (or peer review to use a more familiar concept) is not new to the learning and skills sector. It is practised quite extensively in processes such as lesson observation, though examples of organisations that have developed a strategic, system-wide approach to this work are more difficult to identify. There is also no definitive view about what peer referencing is and how it should be carried out. For the purpose of the work now being taken forward by the Quality Improvement Agency, peer referencing is defined as *'a process whereby professional of similar status or standing exercise collective judgements about the quality and standards of provision, as well as shared responsibilities for their improvement'.*

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

Peer referencing may be distinguished from some forms of peer review in terms of the greater weight attached to performance measurement and the use of comparative performance indicators. An agreed evaluative framework is required for this purpose. Beyond this, the distinguishing features of peer referencing include diagnostics, dialogue, feedback and coaching. This is not work that can be carried out easily at a distance though information and communication technologies can be used to enhance the process. It is a process that must be well led and managed. Essential support activities include the selection and training of staff, resource allocation and project planning.

What is being referenced and by whom?

Peer referencing raises fundamental questions about the nature of 'peership' in the learning and skills sector, the areas of work that can be subject to peer scrutiny and the types of peer relationship that might be formed to carry out this work.

Peers are people of equivalent status who work in a similar environment and have shared knowledge, expertise or skills. Peer relationships can be established between governors, managers, teachers and trainers, and staff working in 'service' functions. Learners and employers may also form peer relationships. Peer referencing provides the opportunity for individuals working within particular roles

to compare their work and performance and to act together to support improvement.

Peer relationships can also be formed between organisations. Here peer referencing can be used to make comparative judgements about organisational strategy, leadership and management, or performances in particular processes, departments or curriculum areas. In voluntary schemes of peer referencing, the particular approach adopted will depend on the needs and priorities of the organisations involved. This flexibility is highly valued by those who engage in peer-to-peer working. Under a national scheme, such flexibility may need to be balanced against the need for common protocols and standards, in the interest of developing a more systematic approach from which the whole sector can benefit.

Peer relationships cannot simply be assumed. Teachers may be reluctant to accept the judgements or support of persons working outside of their own curriculum areas. Similarly, colleges and other learning providers may be reluctant to enter peer relationships with organisations with different missions, values, curriculum or occupational profiles or standards of performance. Competitive pressures arising from location or market position may also be significant factors affecting the choice of partners for peer referencing work.

There are fundamental questions to be addressed in deciding on the types of peer referencing schemes that might best support a self-regulating sector. Can peer referencing be successfully undertaken between providers operating at different levels of performance? Are peer relationships best developed locally, regionally or nationally? Should peer relationships be established between providers in different parts of the sector or on a cross-sector basis? What is the optimum size and life of a peer referencing group? Should peer relationships be self or externally brokered? Should they be self-managed or externally facilitated? Should peer referencing work be externally funded? How do providers balance their individual and collective responsibilities for assuring and improving the quality and standards of provision?

Peer referencing – a new term?

The term peer referencing was first used by the LSC as part of its 'agenda for change' programme. QIA has continued to use this term in relation to work carried out as part of the national pilots and related projects. Whilst the term adequately conveys the assessment aspects of this work (including benchmarking), there is a emerging view from QIA and other organisations participating in peer-to-peer working, that the term fails to reflect the developmental, improvement-orientated nature of this work, including the sharing and transfer of good practice. It has been proposed that the term 'peer review and development' (PRD) most adequately conveys the scope and purpose of this work and this proposal will be included as one of the recommendations arising from the evaluation of the national pilot projects.

Appendix 2: Sample materials and documentation from the pilots

Example 1 (from East Midlands Project)

GUIDANCE FOR PEER REVIEW TEAM LEADERS

This guidance is solely for the peer-review team leader during the pilot phase of the national LSC peer-review project. The team leader, who will hold a position in one of the partner colleges, will be appointed by the Pilot Steering Group.

ROLE

- The peer-review team leader will be responsible for the effective management of the review process and the deployment of the review team.

- Working closely with the host college nominee for the peer-review, the team leader will negotiate and confirm the scope of the review through the production of a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA).

- The team leader will plan the detailed programme for the review and will arrange for the compilation of an appropriate review team to be drawn from each of the partner colleges.

- The team leader will be responsible for arranging daily feedback on the progress of the review to the host college nominee and for producing the summative feedback to the college on the outcomes of the review.

- The team leader will ensure the reviewers develop joint action planning with the college.

PLANNING

- The first responsibility of the team leader is to negotiate and confirm the precise dates of the review and the scope of the review with the host college nominee.

- The MoA describing the details of the review should be completed at least 6 weeks prior to the start of the review.

- The team leader will arrange for the host college Self-Assessment Report to be circulated to the review team at least 2 weeks prior to the start of the review.

- The team leader in association with the college, will be responsible for the production of the review plan indicating timings of the reviews, team meetings, feedback meetings and future review team activities with locations. The programme will be circulated to the review team at least 2 weeks prior to the start of the review.

RECORDING

- Each review team member will be responsible for keeping notes of reviews in a format at the discretion of individual reviewers.

- The team leader will be responsible for providing a bullet-point summary report to the host college as the review is based around the CIF peer-review framework.

EVALUATION

- At the end of each review the team leader, together with the review team, will undertake an evaluation of the peer-review process. The review will cover:

    - ratings for the value of the review

    - staff/learner views

    - team suitability/approach

    - what the college intend to do as a result of the process

    - lessons to be learnt for the next peer review process

    - identified areas of agreement and disagreement on the review judgements, and why.

Example 2 (from East Midlands Project)

PEER REVIEW MEMORANDUM OF AGREEMENT

- In the period January 2006 to December 2006 the purpose of peer-review is to inform and facilitate quality improvement in each of the six partner colleges.

- The host college will invite a team of reviewers to examine in detail, one or more aspects of its work.

- The subject of the review may be:

OVERALL AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE REVIEW

- The work of one or more teaching departments

- A Key Question from the Common Inspection Framework or a subset of a Key Question

- The work of one or more support departments

- Particular processes in the college.

- Two general themes will run through all peer-reviews, focussing on:

- *The capacity to improve (ie DIF, KQ 5 criteria)*

- *The voice of the learners*

DATE AND TIMES OF THE REVIEW

The peer-review at .... College

will begin on: ..………………………………………………………………………

and be completed by: …...………………………………………………………….

The review team will undertake the review between 9.30 am and 5.30 pm on each of the review dates.

SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

The scope of the peer-review at .... College

will include: …………………………………………………………………………

OUTCOME OF THE REVIEW

The peer-review team leader will present to the college on behalf of the review team:

Validation of …………………………………………………………………………...

Recommendations on ....

Advice on how to improve …………………………………………………………………..

PEER REVIEW TEAM LEADER

The team leader for the review of …………………….................................. College

will be …………..

from …………………………………………………….......................... College.

The team leader will provide the college with a summative report by

……………………………………………………………………………………………..

Example 3 (from East Midlands Project)

NOTTINGHAMSHIRE/LEICESTERSHIRE PEER-REVIEW PILOT

REVIEWER PROFILE

NAME:	COLLEGE:
POSITION AND DUTIES:	
QUALIFICATIONS:	SUBJECT SPECIALISM:
RECENT INDUSTRIAL EXPERIENCE/TRAINING:	
TEACHING EXPERIENCE:	
PROGRAMME AREA RESPONSIBILITY:	
CROSS COLLEGE RESPONSIBILITY:	

Example 4 (from South East Region Pathfinder Pilot Project)

EXTERNAL PEER REVIEWER: ROLE DESCRIPTION

The person acting as external reviewer will follow the protocols of the SERPR Project (agreed by conference on 4 September 2006) and provide input into the moderation of the college's self assessment report as a critical friend, based on appropriate knowledge and experience of leadership and management within the FE context and a firm understanding of the Common Inspection Framework.

The external moderator will support the college's internal process of self assessment by participating in the college's own moderation process and provide a constructive external viewpoint on the collected judgements, evidence-base and development issues encapsulated in the draft self assessment report – particularly relating to leadership and management and the capacity to improve. In undertaking this task the moderator will consider:

- The internal consistency and comprehensiveness of the commentary provided for leadership, management and the capacity to improve.

- The degree of evaluation, rather than description provided by the commentary, evidence-base and judgement statements.

- The appropriateness and use made of available evidence.

- The range of evidence used to support judgements.

- The relevance of evidence used.

- Whether grading is consistent with underlying judgements or supporting commentary.

- The robustness of statements contained in the self assessment and the degree to which they are evaluative.

- The accuracy and comprehensiveness to which key strengths and areas for development have been identified and articulated.

- Whether improvement gains have been substantially identified.

- Whether actions for continued improvement have been clearly and accurately identified.

It is expected that each college in the scheme will put forward two senior managers of their college who have substantial experience of leadership and management within a college context and have a clear and detailed grasp of the CIF and supporting documents such as the Inspection Handbook.

Each person put forward will join a training group to ensure that both the focus and attitude of the reviewer is appropriately constructive, as well as analytical and reflective. Wherever possible reviewers will be expected to identify, promote and

share good practice in issues of leadership, management and capacity to improve. The reviewer should not be seen as an expert reference point within the moderation panel they join in the host college; neither must they attempt to act as such. In all cases the decisions regarding grades and evidence within the self-assessment process should be seen as the responsibility of the college.

The person will be expected to maintain the confidentiality of the college to which they act as a reviewer and will be expected to feedback on the process of self assessment moderation to develop the protocols and improve the practice of peer review. The reviewer will be expected to debrief his/her experience of the process following an assignment, solely for the purposes of developing the process of peer review and sharing/establishing good practice in this aspect of self assessment. Each reviewer will be expected to undertake one assignment each year – and to assist in their independence of view, the next assignment should avoid the same host college.

PROTOCOLS

- Each college in the Project will identify two senior managers to act as external peer reviewers to other colleges in the Project.

- No college will receive a reviewer from a college their representatives review – to avoid a loss of independence/neutrality in the review, nor will the same reviewer review a college twice in a row.

- The CIF and supporting documents will be the basis for review activities.

- Moderators will be notified directly by the host college of the timing of their moderation processes and will be sent relevant documentation two weeks prior to the moderation taking place.

- Each college is responsible for agreeing an external peer reviewer from the Project's pool of peer reviewers, and all the administration to support the effective engagement of those reviewers.

- Each reviewer will attend briefing and debriefing events to develop the process and role of peer reviewer and to share good practice across this Project.

- Peer reviewers will test the Project sub-group's proposed good practice in aspects of leadership and management and seek to develop these further.

Example 5 (from South East Regional Pathfinder Pilot Project)

SOUTH EAST REGIONAL PEER REVIEW PILOT – COLLEGE PROFORMA
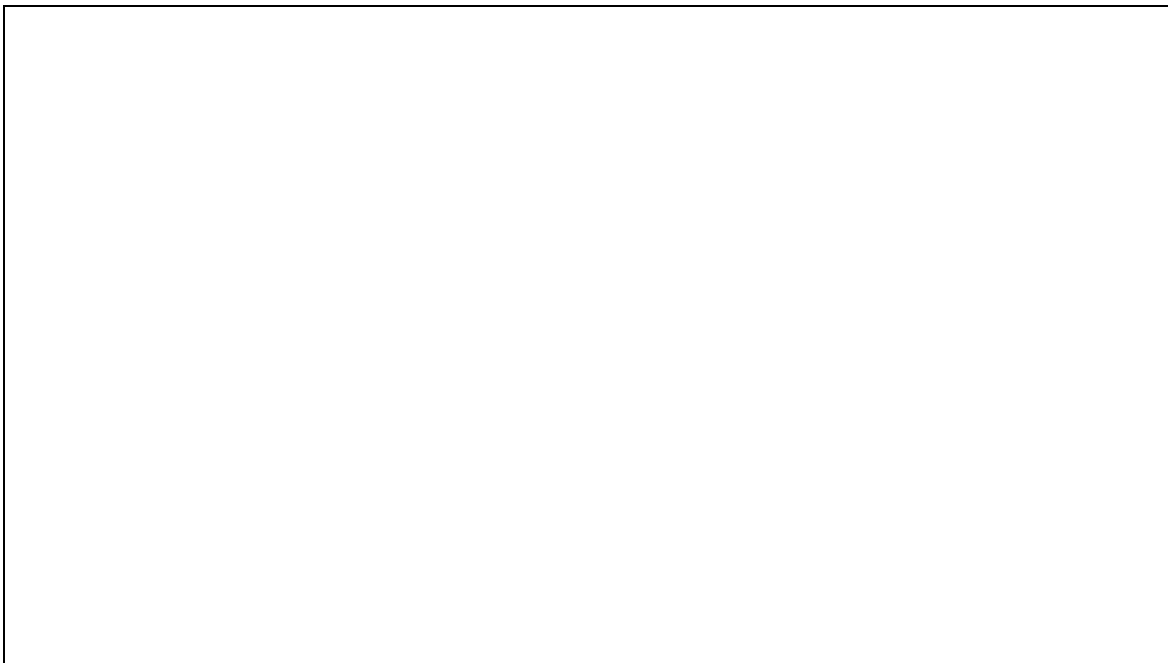
NAME OF COLLEGE: _____

As head of your institution please take a few minutes to respond to the following five questions:

13. How much contact have you and other members of your college had with external peer reviewers from the pilot?

14. What benefits has your college had from having peer reviewers from the pilot involved with your self assessment report?

15. How do you see self assessment and quality improvement developing in the sector over the next four years?

16. Working with others in the region, what does your college want from peer referencing/peer review?

17. Would you prefer to work with the QIA or with other colleges to strengthen your self assessment process in preparation for self regulation?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this form.