Support for Success
Quality Improvement Programme

from little acorns towards a strategy for spreading good practice within colleges

Philip Cox and Vikki Smith
What can be done to improve differential performance within colleges? Why do colleges perform differently across areas of learning? Why cannot the weakest departments within a college learn from the best?

In 2002, the Learning and Skills Development Agency set out to explore these questions through a research project aimed at identifying how colleges spread good internal practice to ensure optimal performance across all areas of provision. This booklet reports on that research.

Untapped sources of knowledge, skills and good practice exist in all colleges, but much more needs to be done to capture and use this intelligence to improve overall organisational performance. This report:

■ provides some context and rationale for sharing good practice internally
■ considers how colleges identify, validate and share good internal practice
■ examines critical factors that support or inhibit the transfer of internal good practice
■ suggests ways of developing a strategy for sharing good practice within colleges.

ISBN 1 85338 937 4
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Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to those contributing to this project: Steve Sawbridge, LSC National Office; Barry Fyfield and Rosemary Moore, LSDA Associates; David Roddam, Lancaster and Morecambe College; Kit Jillings, Lewisham College; Dave Muller and Marilyn Watsham, Suffolk College; Geoff Petty and Kate Mulleady, Sutton Coldfield College; John Wright, Tameside College; David Casewell, Tresham Institute; Liz Aitken and colleagues, Project Manager, CoVE, LSDA; Emily Hider, Coordinator, Support for Success.
Summary

This publication is based on research undertaken by the Learning and Skills Development Agency, reporting during spring 2003. It aims to examine how colleges spread good internal practice with a view to improving the quality and standards across the institution as a whole.

This report:

■ provides some context and rationale for the growing imperative to share good practice internally

■ looks at the ways in which colleges have sought to identify, validate and share good internal practice

■ examines some of the critical factors that have supported or inhibited the transfer of internal good practice within colleges

■ suggests ways of developing a strategy for sharing good practice within colleges.

In response to the question of whether colleges have effective strategies for sharing good internal practice in order to optimise their overall performance, the following answers have emerged from this project.

■ Colleges use a range of processes for identifying good internal practice. These processes have typically been developed over time, in relatively unstructured ways, without any overarching strategy, policy or plan.

■ Colleges often place greater confidence in internal practice that has been externally validated (particularly through inspection), despite reduced sensitivity to institutional context.

■ Many good ideas remain unexploited in colleges because staff do not recognise their own good practice or lack the opportunity to have it validated.

■ Colleges have developed a range of mechanisms for sharing good internal practice. Again, many of these have been developed over time, in relatively unstructured ways, without any overarching strategy, policy or plan.

■ Colleges have sought to raise awareness of good practice through databases and intranet technologies. Very few colleges, however, have sought to monitor staff access to, and use of, good practice materials from these sources.

■ Professional development is a key activity for promoting knowledge/skills-sharing within colleges. Few colleges, however, have used recruitment and appraisal processes for this purpose.
■ Colleges offer few tangible incentives for sharing good practice other than time release.

■ Colleges recognise the importance of actively engaging staff in the process of knowledge/skills-sharing and transfer, for example action research projects, professional development activity, and training on implementation planning following dissemination events.

■ Colleges have established posts specifically focused on identifying and sharing good practice, eg advanced practitioners. Some colleges have appointed the equivalent of ‘knowledge brokers’ with a dedicated brief to facilitate the transfer of good practice.

■ External funding has often been necessary to kick-start college initiatives. Though core funding has been used to maintain such programmes, no college has carried out the kind of cost-benefit analysis that might be necessary to sustain the funding of initiatives in the longer term.

■ While colleges have developed a range of methods for sharing good internal practice, less attention has been given to provision for monitoring good practice transfer.

■ Few colleges have sought systematically to measure the impact of good practice transfer or to set targets for improvement. In the absence of such measures it is difficult to demonstrate the benefits of good practice transfer or to identify strategies that work.

■ Most colleges have pursued a values-driven approach to sharing good practice. Some have also sought to develop the structures and processes necessary to support cross-functional working.

■ No college involved in this study, however, has developed an overall strategy for sharing good internal practice. One college (College D) has identified the sharing of good practice as a key feature of its overall mission. For other colleges, good practice transfer was subsumed implicitly as an aspect of their overall quality improvement strategy.
Based on these assumptions and findings, what then would/should a strategy for sharing good internal practice look like and why should colleges wish to adopt one?

The findings generated from this research suggest that a strategy for sharing good internal practice could be built on the following 10 elements:

1. formal and informal ways of identifying good ideas within the college
2. internal and external mechanisms for validating good practice
3. the incorporation of good internal practice into college policies and processes
4. the use of ICT systems to disseminate good practice
5. passive and active ways of sharing good practice
6. skills development to facilitate good practice transfer
7. arrangements for monitoring the transfer of good practice
8. ways of measuring the impact of good practice transfer
9. identification of the barriers to good practice transfer and how these will be addressed
10. methods for evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of the strategy.

Implicit in this set of assumptions is the existence of a formalised and managed process for sharing good practice and an organisational culture capable of supporting that process.
Introduction

There is a great deal of literature on the sharing of good practice in the private sector and in parts of the public sector. In post-16 education and training, interest has centred on how to improve the quality and standards of provision through more effective arrangements for sharing good practice between colleges and other providers. For example:

- the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) has given prominence to the sharing of good practice from Beacon providers
- the recently established Further Education Standards Unit is engaged in identifying and disseminating good practice in teaching and learning
- the Centre of Vocational Excellence initiative requires all providers with Centre of Vocational Excellence status to share good practice within and across vocational areas.

These strategies demonstrate and recognise the value of spreading good practice.

Until recently, less attention had been given to provision for sharing good practice within colleges. This is starting to change. Inspection regimes are raising concerns about differential performance across areas of learning. The LSC Quality Improvement Strategy envisages greater consistency in provider performance across all areas of provision. Many colleges are starting to see sharing good internal practice as an integral part of an organisation-wide quality improvement strategy.

Why, though, do colleges perform differently across areas of learning? Why cannot the weakest departments within a college learn from the best? In 2002 the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) set out to explore these questions through a research project aimed at identifying how colleges and others in the sector can – and do – spread good internal practice to ensure optimal performance across all areas of provision. This publication is based on the results of that research.
The researchers worked with practitioners in six colleges to determine how providers identify, validate, share and transfer good internal practice. Drawing on the findings of this work and other research studies, the report questions the presumption that colleges and staff that are effective at identifying and developing good practice necessarily have the skills and strategies to ensure the successful transfer of this practice. This sheds some light on the conundrum of whether failing or ‘coasting’ colleges lack the know-how to improve their performance or whether they could achieve significant improvements in performance by enhancing their capacity to share good practice that already exists within their organisations.

This report suggests that untapped sources of knowledge, skills and good practice exist in all colleges, but that much more needs to be done to capture and use this intelligence to improve overall organisational performance.
The research

Inspection regimes in post-16 learning identify major variations in the performance of departments and areas of learning within individual colleges. Research into organisational effectiveness within the schools sector also confirms that variations in classroom performance within a school are often greater than variations in performance between schools.

In the light of these findings, the overarching question for this study was:

■ What can be done to address differential performance within colleges?

To do justice to this all-embracing question and to examine how colleges spread good internal practice with a view to improving quality and standards, a number of other questions were also addressed.

■ How can (and do) colleges successfully spread practice from the best performing departments so that all departments operate at an optimum level?

■ What are the key factors that support or inhibit the spreading of good practice within colleges?

■ What impact does the spreading of good practice have on overall college performance?

Three research stages were implemented.

Stage 1 of the study was an extensive literature search on the spreading of good practice within public sector and private organisations. The key tenets emerging from this study were mapped against the issues surfacing in the fieldwork.

The literature review formed the basis for the more detailed qualitative work of stage 2, which involved explorations of good practice sharing and transfer in six colleges. This fieldwork covered a spectrum of provision – from colleges that had been commended by inspection teams for the effective spreading of good practice across departments and curriculum areas, to those in the embryonic stages of developing activities for the spreading of good practice in response to concerns identified in inspection reports. The rationale for this was to:

■ uncover the catalysts for colleges when adopting such approaches

■ isolate the internal, college-led factors associated with sharing good practice with a view to improving performance.
In-depth, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with staff in the selected colleges, based on a grounded-theory approach (see Appendix 2 on page 44 for the interview schedule exploring these complex issues, with prompts for interviewers). The researchers spent a day at each college, exploring with a cross-section of staff (quality managers, heads of department, teaching and support staff, and the senior management team) the strategies used for spreading good practice, the associated rationale and their effectiveness.

Fieldwork enabled patterns of practice within the case study colleges to emerge and to be mapped against the available literature in stage 3. The examples provided and the conclusions drawn capture the key points for consideration by colleges when seeking to develop a college-wide strategy for spreading good practice. It also supported the development of a typology of how colleges seek to spread good practice in order to improve overall organisational performance (see Appendix 1 on page 39).
Setting the scene

There has been much interest in finding ways of improving quality and standards through more effective arrangements for sharing good practice between learning providers. The LSC has recently published a report on the sharing of good practice between colleges (LSC 2003a). It has also published a research briefing on the sharing of good practice as a means of improving post-16 education and training (LSC 2002). Through its quality improvement strategy, the LSC funds Beacon providers to share their good practice through dissemination and collaborative work with other providers. It also funds providers with Centre of Vocational Excellence status to share their good practice with other providers. The Centre of Vocational Excellence initiative has established links with the new Standards Unit at the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), which also has a remit for disseminating good practice identified within particular areas of learning.

In the light of this work, it is perhaps surprising that much less attention has been paid to ways of improving good practice sharing within learning providers. There are, however, growing pressures for this situation to change.

- Inspection reports are increasingly raising concerns about variations in provider performance across areas of learning.
- There are concerns too arising from the LSC Provider Performance Review process about the failure of ‘middle band’ and ‘coasting’ colleges to deliver consistent performance across all aspects provision.
- Within the Centre of Vocational Excellence initiative, there is early evidence that the willingness and capacity of providers to engage in external sharing of practice has not been matched by a similar propensity to share practice internally.

These shortcomings are leading to a reappraisal of the capacity of providers to optimise their performance across all areas of learning and the external intervention that will be necessary to support this end. It is also leading some commentators (and some colleges) to propose that strategies for spreading good internal practice may have rather greater dividends for quality improvement than those based on external sharing. Writing about the schools sector, David Reynolds, Professor of Education at Exeter University, observes:
[We need] to rid ourselves of the notion that the way to improve the system is through school-to-school transfer of good practice ... What is much more sensible is to focus schools not on being patronisingly dependent on some super school helping them out but on learning from their own best practice. Every school, no matter how well it is doing overall, has practitioners relatively better than others; many schools will have excellent teachers defined in national terms, and a significant proportion of schools will have world-class people. Helping schools to learn from their best practitioners is conceptually simple. It is practically easy - there is a much better chance of learning from someone in the next classroom than from someone 20 miles away. Learning from your colleagues also removes any alibis for poor practice, since it is always possible to find explanations for why other schools are doing better to avoid taking any notice of them.

Reynolds (2003)
What is good practice and how can it be shared within colleges?

Much is written about the sharing of ‘good practice’ ... unfortunately our knowledge of how this might be best done is frighteningly slight. Where it is being done, it is not being done particularly well or as a result of official action. 

Hargreaves (2003, page 44)

Although much has been written about the sharing of good practice, it is difficult for college managers and practitioners to judge what good practice actually is, never mind how best to share it. The term ‘good practice’ can be used to refer to ‘standard’ practice, considered effective within a profession where it forms part of professional practice that entrants to the profession are expected to learn. Perhaps more typically, the term can also be used to describe less common and/or new practices that are considered more effective than standard practice. Beyond this normative definition, it is sometimes argued that good practice should not only be effective for those using it, but also proven to be effective in a wider organisational setting.

For the purposes of this report, good practice may be defined as: ‘any practice, know how or experience that has proven to be valuable or effective in one organization that may have applicability to other organizations’. This definition, used by the Chevron Corporation and quoted by O’Dell and Grayson (1998), is also applicable to the transfer of practice between different parts of the same organisation. Adopting this definition allows us to make an important distinction between good ideas and good practice:

- a good idea is something that is unproven but makes sense intuitively; it requires further work and evidence to demonstrate its effectiveness
- by contrast, good practice is practice that has demonstrably improved organisational performance and normally achieved some level of third-party validation.

Two further criteria for judging good practice that are relevant to this project are suggested by Hargreaves (2003):

- the practice should have a high ‘leverage’, that is, it should be both effective (eg improves learning) and efficient (eg helps the teacher to work smarter)
- the practice should be transferable to as many other practitioners and settings as possible (a practice that is difficult to transfer will be of little value to the wider organisation or sector).
Hargreaves suggests that the best practices are those that have a high leverage and are easily transferable.

Through his research on the sharing of good practice within schools, Hargreaves (2003, page 46) concludes: ‘In short, much of what is said about “good practice” is based on mere opinion or unsubstantiated assertion rather than robust evidence about “what works, in particular circumstances”.

Although concerned with the school sector, Hargreaves’s work provides a useful yardstick for analysing arrangements for sharing good internal practice within the college sector. Using a typology adapted from Hargreaves (1999), we examine here the ways in which colleges seek to identify, validate and share good internal practice based on the following categories:

■ personal contact
■ peer review
■ customer judgements
■ knowledge brokers
■ research and development projects
■ external experts.

**Personal contact**

Personal contact is the least formal channel for sharing good practice. Staff frequently share ideas and practices on a day-to-day basis through conversations in corridors, staffrooms and staff meetings. In these situations, teachers and other practitioners may make personal judgements about the value of some alternative practice without corroboration from third parties. Such situations are likely to generate a close working relationship (and trust) between the source and the recipient of the practice, though in the absence of third-party validation, such practice is unlikely to be shared across the college. In short, these remain good ideas, not good practice exploited more widely within the college.

During the research, many staff commented on the loss of opportunities for the informal sharing of good practice because of heavy teaching loads and through the loss of staffrooms and other social facilities.

■ College D recognised the importance of informal knowledge-sharing but did not believe that it would be practical or helpful to use college structures and processes to formalise these arrangements. It does, however, attempt to create a sharing culture under which such exchanges can thrive.
Other colleges have sought to develop structures to promote informal knowledge-sharing. For example, College A holds fortnightly staff forums for this purpose and the minutes from these meetings are made available to senior managers; College C encourages specialist forums to identify and share good practice as part of their terms of reference.

Peer review

Peer review processes to facilitate professional judgements on current practice are commonplace in many colleges. Peer review activities, such as lesson observation, course-based self-assessment and internal inspection, offer opportunities for a more systematic approach to identifying and sharing good practice.

College A operates a college-wide approach to lesson observation and grading that links to appraisal and continuous professional development. Good practice is recorded and drawn together at intervals to inform staff development events. (Any provision identified as Grade 3 or below prompts staff development.) Staff development events are coordinated to maximise staff participation and involvement.

Similar processes are implemented within both College B and College C, the latter publishing an annual report describing good practice that has been identified through lesson observations.

Team-based self-assessment is used to identify good practice in most colleges, though greater attention is more commonly given to identifying areas for improvement.

At College C, staff are asked to hypothesise on the reasons for course success (or failure) against key indicators such as retention and achievement, and self-selected indicators. They are asked to identify examples of good practice as part of this exercise.

Provision for validating and sharing ‘good’ practice identified through self-assessment is perhaps less well defined within colleges.

At College B, external ‘critical friends’ are used to improve the rigour of self-assessment and the status of ‘good practice’ judgements.

At College F, individual departments are expected to disseminate good practice through the wider quality improvement/ review processes of the college. Curriculum managers also have responsibility for disseminating good practice to their staff.

At College A, good practice identified in internal review processes informs quality improvement projects developed in response to priorities established through the processes of self-assessment and lesson observation.
Most colleges have developed internal audit systems to complement self-assessment or to validate self-assessment findings. All of the case study colleges had developed internal inspection processes to support standard-setting through which ‘normal’ and ‘good’ practice could be judged. Good internal practice identified through such internal inspections is deemed to be externally validated.

- College B had recruited and trained internal inspection teams to work both inside and outside the college (thereby linking the internal and external validation of good practice).

- At College F, staff trained as Ofsted inspectors carried out mock inspections.

The effectiveness of peer review as a means of identifying, validating and sharing good practice depends on the credence attached to the peer judgements. Subject or curriculum-based knowledge and skills are often seen as a prerequisite for making valid judgements on teaching and learning issues.

- At College F, the audit scheme that predated the system of internal inspection had been criticised because the auditors were seen to lack the specialist expertise necessary to make valid judgements. The college now recognises that specialist knowledge may be necessary to legitimise judgements made through internal inspection.

Customer judgements

In commercial models of quality management, the customers of products and services are seen as the ultimate arbiters of quality and good practice. In education and training there is a rather more equivocal view about customer judgements. National agencies within post-16 learning commonly distinguish between ‘quality’ judgements and judgements that reflect ‘user satisfaction’. The presumption here is that quality judgements, including judgements on good practice, are best made by experts and not by the users of the service. Inspection regimes are themselves founded on the presumption that users may lack the information or expertise to make valid judgements about quality or good practice.

The limited role assigned to learners and employers in identifying and validating good practice was reflected in the feedback received as part of this project. While all case study colleges had developed comprehensive mechanisms for obtaining learner feedback, few reported any systematic use of this feedback to inform strategies for sharing good internal practice. At best, learner feedback is used to corroborate other sources of evidence.
College E, for example, compares learner feedback with internal inspection findings and retention and achievement outcomes. Good practice indicators are then identified and shared across the college. Factors associated with the high level of learner satisfaction at one site were, for example, shared with staff at other sites.

Knowledge brokers

Knowledge brokers, by any other name, are those who enable and facilitate the creation, sharing and use of good practice – skills or knowledge – for the benefit of learners and the college as a whole. Many colleges are beginning to establish posts with designated responsibilities for identifying, validating and sharing good practice. In response to such a directive, both College B and College C have appointed senior managers to coordinate strategies for transforming teaching and learning.

Knowledge brokers can fulfil the following functions:

- translating and communicating good practice
- filtering information
- sharing relevant (and perhaps selective) practices
- bringing together those demonstrating good working practices with those seeking to improve the quality of a particular dimension of teaching and learning.

Advanced practitioners are used to promote good teaching practice at colleges A, F and C.

- At College C, the responsibilities of advanced practitioners are linked to their specialist area of expertise, which is seen to reinforce their credibility with staff working in that area of learning.

- At College E, recently appointed learning mentors will work through the appraisal system to support staff with poor lesson observation grades, using Grade 1 practice identified elsewhere within the college.

- New staff at College B are also linked to experienced practitioners with a remit to validate and share good practice.

Over and above the notion of an advanced practitioner, some colleges sought to use their most able staff as knowledge champions. This is seen to give credibility to the practice being shared and the means of sharing it.

- Staff at College C spoke of the college’s approach to ‘talent spotting’ and ‘nurturing’ staff capable of developing and sharing good practice. By building a pool of knowledge champions, the college was able to build up its capacity for sharing practice and reduce dependency on key individuals.
External persons are sometimes appointed to act as knowledge brokers within a college.

At College D, an external consultant was responsible for developing a strategic approach to sharing good teaching and learning practice through the use of action research projects. Apart from bringing research expertise and credibility to this work, the consultant had a key management role in facilitating the sharing of good practice: ‘helping it to happen, delivering the underpinning research and methodology in bite-sized bits, having the enthusiasm, creating an ethos and getting staff to sign up to it’. The consultant worked closely with the vice-principal at the college, who gave overall authority to this work. These roles mirror what Hargreaves (2003) terms the relationship between ‘practitioner champions’ and ‘advocate champions’.

Research and development projects

In two of the case study colleges, action research projects were used as a central part of a concerted strategy for identifying and sharing good practice in teaching and learning.

At College D, three approaches to teaching and learning that are seen to have the greatest impact on achievement and retention – active learning strategies, feedback to learners and the development of generic learner skills – have been the focus of several action research projects. Project teams use secondary research materials, such as national research studies, to identify ‘generic’ good practice, then seek to transfer this practice to their own areas of learning. This approach recognises that good practice transfer is more likely to occur when staff are involved in the development, as well as the sharing, of that practice. It also recognises that staff are more likely to adopt alternative practice if they apply such practice to their own circumstances and needs. Dissemination events and coaching/support workshops are held at the end of the projects. Project reports and materials are stored on the college intranet to allow wider access within the college (though there is no tracking of actual use). Where appropriate, research findings are mainstreamed into self-assessment and other quality improvement processes of the college. Research findings are also usually trialled before being adopted in other parts of the college. An external consultant is used to facilitate the whole process (see ‘Knowledge brokers’, above).
At College C, the sharing of good internal practice forms part of a key policy initiative: ‘transforming teaching’. The policy proposes action research projects as the main strategy for achieving this end. All staff are invited to participate in these projects, choosing topics and good practice materials relevant to their needs. This information may come from external research findings or from internal sources such as advanced practitioners. Good practice may be shared between projects. Projects are expected to shift good ideas to validated good practice, though not necessarily to best practice.

At both of these colleges, action research projects are seen as part of a long-term strategy, rather than a ‘quick fix’. The projects are not specifically aimed at underperforming staff, but assume that all staff are capable of (and responsible for) improving their own practice. Ownership and the willingness to experiment are considered critical. The approach also acknowledges that there is a risk involved and that, in experimenting, staff performance may dip before improving. Research shows that this is the case. The focus is therefore on process as much as on outcomes. The colleges believe that staff participation in a project should increase their capacity for critical reflection, a necessary prerequisite for knowledge-development and sharing.

Colleges also use development projects to support the identification and sharing of good practice.

At College F, a mock inspection using external consultants had identified weak aspects of tutorial provision, particularly inconsistency of practice. A tutorial working group was subsequently set up to identify good practice inside and outside the college. One-to-one discussions were held with 40 staff internally in addition to external visits. Once good practice had been identified, this was repackaged to form a tutorial policy, framework and entitlement for application across the college. A tutorial improvement plan has been produced and tutor training planned. No arrangements have yet been made for monitoring good practice transfer or the impact of such transfer, though this is under review.

At College B, retention and achievement projects have been used to support the sharing of good practice. The lessons of a successful project to improve achievement in GNVQ IT programmes had been shared, with all courses identified as having weak retention or achievement.
Teaching and learning projects have also been undertaken at College A as a direct result of self-assessment and lesson observation processes. Projects focused on:
- differentiated teaching and learning
- information and learning technology
- basic skills
- key skills
- personal tutorials.

Local targets were set for each of these projects and actioned by senior teacher practitioners. The projects were small and therefore manageable. Staff worked in pairs and disseminated lessons learnt.

External experts

Colleges may use their own processes and resources to support the identification and sharing of good practice. They are, of course, also subject to external judgements that may be used as a resource and/or a lever to support internal knowledge/skills-sharing. Inspection reports are potentially a powerful force for this purpose.

There are no explicit assessment criteria within the Common Inspection Framework (CIF) for assessing college provision in the sharing of good internal practice. Inspection reports have, however, identified concerns regarding differential college performance across areas of learning. Some colleges have been required to improve arrangements for sharing good internal practice as a requirement of post-inspection planning. Significantly, very few inspection reports to date have commended colleges for strengths in this area. Further inspections can identify and comment on sharing good practice as an institution-wide issue, be it a strength or weakness, but when it is noted as a weakness the sharing of good practice does not appear to be a key feature of the re-inspection remit for specific areas of work.
College A, one of the first colleges in the country to be inspected under the CIF, was awarded a Grade 1 assessment for a particular area of learning. As a result, it was regarded as a ‘benchmark’ for good practice. The college subsequently received monies from Standards Fund Category 5a to disseminate this practice to other colleges and from Standards Fund Category 5b to share practice with other curriculum areas within the college. The latter project was targeted at improvements in centres graded 3 and 4, with enhanced practice being sought in Grade 2 centres. Ten thematic development sessions were held for staff on a weekly basis at an agreed time (Wednesdays, 4–6pm). Inputs from the staff concerned were followed by interactive exercises for idea generation and implementation planning. Following each development session, delegates were asked to identify specific changes to their current practice: those that they could action immediately, within two weeks and by the end of the term/year. Programmes were held to induct staff into new ways of working and to provide support materials. Work shadowing was also undertaken. Follow-up sessions with programme teams and relevant centre heads were held to observe the changes in practice that had occurred as a direct result of the development sessions. The project led to a review of those practices that could be imported into other areas of the college and used as a basis for a college-wide approach to the sharing of good practice.

At College B, a similar approach to sharing practice across departments had been undertaken, though not as a requirement of post-inspection planning. Following the relocation of one department to the college’s main campus, it was agreed that staff should be formally inducted into the practices of certain departments on the main site and given first-hand experience of how these were being put into practice in a Grade 1 area. One department had received two Grade 1s in a fairly recent FEFC inspection and had more recently been awarded Centre of Vocational Excellence status. This department organised workshops to demonstrate how teaching sessions were structured in the Grade 1 area and how initial assessment and learning styles can be used to engage and motivate learners. An external trainer was employed to support this development.
Apart from inspection, the LSC-funded Centre of Vocational Excellence initiative is another potentially important driver for the sharing of good practice within colleges. The designation of ‘Centre of Vocation Excellence’ is awarded to centres within a college which demonstrate excellence in meeting employers’ skill needs in specialist vocational areas. As a condition for achieving Centre of Vocational Excellence status (and funding), each centre is required to prepare a development plan specifying, among other factors, the arrangements for the internal and external sharing of good practice. These plans offer few insights into college thinking in this area. Feedback from Centre of Vocational Excellence workshops, undertaken during the course of this project, also confirmed that while some colleges were developing imaginative approaches to the sharing of practice with other providers, few centres were seeking (or being encouraged) to share good Centre of Vocational Excellence practice within their organisations.

The perception of the Centre of Vocational Excellence designation as a skills rather than a quality kitemark may account for the apparently limited arrangements for disseminating Centre of Vocational Excellence practice within colleges. Yet given the current focus on the skills agenda, and the demands on colleges to engage with employers in skills development, the comparative neglect of this area of activity gives some cause for concern. With this in mind, a project has been commissioned to develop a better understanding of the skills base necessary to support the transfer of good Centre of Vocational Excellence practice (see LSDA August 2003).
Factors that support and inhibit internal good practice transfer

Transferability involves the movement of knowledge or practice between persons and between settings. What works well for a primary school teacher may not work well for a teacher in an FE college. What works well for learners in a rural area may not work well for learners in an inner city area (Hargreaves 2003). It therefore follows that the transfer of good practice within colleges should, in principle, be easier than the transfer of practice between colleges because of the shared organisational context in which staff work. That said, Szulanski (1995) found that even the best organisations took up to 27 months to transfer good internal practice from one part of the organisation to another.

Why are organisations unable to share and transfer good internal practice successfully from one function or location to another? This project has identified the following critical success factors for sharing good practice within colleges:

- awareness of good practice
- recording of good practice
- understanding of good practice
- confidence in the source of the practice
- recognition of professional subcultures
- cross-functional working
- staff motivation
- funding and support
- measurement of impact.

Each of these factors is examined in turn below.

Awareness of good practice

In most organisations, individuals carry out activities that constitute good practice without recognising it or without knowing that others might value it. Similarly, those who could benefit from such practice are unaware that it exists elsewhere in the organisation. Ignorance is one of the biggest barriers to the sharing and transfer of good practice within organisations (Szulanski 1995).
Feedback from colleges taking part in this project confirms that there are many good ideas in colleges that fail to achieve the status of good practice. This, as Hargreaves (2003) observes, is because we have a relatively superficial knowledge of what practitioners in education and training actually do, particularly in classroom settings. All teachers and managers depend on bodies of knowledge, but much of this knowledge is tacit or experiential rather than explicitly defined. Organisational knowledge is about what people in an organisation know about their customers, products and processes, mistakes and successes. Many conventional approaches to identifying and sharing good practice rarely examine this wider experiential knowledge (e.g. inspection and annual internal review processes). Others may do so but only in the context of one-off projects (e.g. action research).

A knowledge and skills audit can tap this wider distribution of hidden knowledge and skills that exists in all organisations, eliciting staff views on the factors that support or inhibit the transfer of good practice within the organisation. Such an audit might ask staff the following questions.

- What do you think you know or do that others might find interesting?
- What aspects of your job do you think you are good at?
- Do you seek to share good practice with other colleagues?
- Do you seek to identify good practice within the college?
- Which colleagues have helped you do things you are best at?

**Recording of good practice**

All colleges participating in this project sought to record good internal practice through published case studies, guidance documents and bulletins. These are typically circulated to departments and made available via central libraries, or through one-off conferences, seminars or workshops. Good local practice may then be adopted as college-wide practice, given policy status and subject to internal audit processes to confirm staff awareness, and uptake, of such practice.

Records of good practice are now increasingly held electronically, for example on CD-ROMs, shared drives or intranets.

- Staff at College F can access such information on shared drives and adapt materials to meet local needs. There is limited guidance or control over how this material is used, except where it forms part of standard college practice (e.g. required use of a standard format lesson plan).
At College D, staff may record good practice materials on the college intranet. Currently these materials are not vetted, although the college is considering a ‘kitemarking’ approach to the recording of good practice on the intranet’s quality pages. The college is also proposing to monitor staff access to these materials (through hits on the intranet) with follow-up questionnaires to determine how the materials have been used and their overall usefulness.

Internet and intranet technologies offer an efficient means of updating and disseminating good practice materials to a wide range of potential users. They are, however, essentially passive media, relying on users to make sense of information provided and to apply it in different organisational settings. In short, information technology ‘makes connection possible but it does not make it happen’ (O’Dell and Grayson 1998).

Understanding of good practice

Research studies confirm that centre–periphery and non-interactive approaches to dissemination lead to low levels of adoption and implementation, even where these are carefully planned (Glaser, Abelson and Garrison 1983). Yet most dissemination strategies within post-16 learning have been founded on these approaches.

An analysis, by the LSC, of projects for sharing good practice supported through the Standards Fund revealed that:

- 68% of projects relied on ‘passive’ dissemination methods, eg publications, websites and conferences
- 28% of projects sought to promote understanding through more active methods of engagement, eg workshops, consultancy and secondments
- only 4% used collaborative networking strategies, eg benchmarking.

Simply providing information from the centre, through publications, bulletins and databases, is not enough to facilitate good practice. Awareness rarely changes practice. For this to happen, more personal and interactive methods are necessary that engage the participants and offer insights into the tacit, experiential knowledge that is the key to understanding how people actually work and perform (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995).
Research by Joyce and Showers (1988) demonstrated that experimentation and coaching make a significant difference to teacher practice. In support of the work of Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), Showers et al. (1987) revealed in their study of 200 In-Service Education and Training programmes for teachers that even though teachers were often very enthusiastic about training they received, they rarely applied it in a sustained way that led to long-term change in practice. Showers et al. (1987) concluded that for training to be truly effective, it should include the following five components or stages:

1. **Theory** where the new approach is explained and justified
2. **Demonstration** to give a model of how this can be put into practice
3. **Practice** so that the teacher can try out the new approach
4. **Feedback** on how well the new approach is working
5. **Coaching** to help the teacher discuss the teaching in a supportive environment and consider how it might be improved.

Showers et al. (1987) suggest that without the opportunity to receive feedback and coaching there is no measurable impact on classroom practice. However, once these two components are added – in particular the final, coaching stage – there is a large and measurable impact on teachers’ practice. The components can be part of a formalised agreement or can be applied more informally. Feedback can result from an observed session. Alternatively, the teacher delivering the lesson might simply describe to colleagues what they did and what happened as a result, including things that went well and things that did not. Coaching goes one step further: it provides an opportunity for the teacher to reflect on the lesson and consider, in a supportive climate, why an approach did or did not work and how it might be changed or refined.

The DfES Standards Unit is incorporating aspects of this staff development model into its work on raising standards of teaching and learning. Its development and roll-out of teaching and learning materials in targeted curriculum areas include a coaching element which helps teachers to reflect on and further develop their practice when using the materials.

The action research projects developed by colleges D and C (see ‘Research and development projects’, page 12) were designed to include feedback and coaching as a means of taking the work forward. They allowed the participants to engage in the process of identifying, validating and sharing good practice and thereby to understand the fine detail of the practice under review. The projects also allowed them to adapt practice to their own particular needs. The projects confirm the findings of other research studies: that staff are more inclined to transfer practice if they can try out ideas in ‘their own backyard’ (O’Dell and Grayson 1998).
Continuing professional development was also recognised as an effective means of 'active' knowledge-sharing in a number of the participating colleges.

- At College C, a Learning and Development Policy and Strategy and a Learning and Development Plan and Programme had been developed around good practice identified inside and outside the college. A Learning and Development Unit had also been established to deliver these plans, with the explicit aim of transforming teaching and learning across the college.

- Other colleges had also prioritised teaching, learning and assessment as the focus for professional development and knowledge/skills transfer. Staff engagement in the sharing of good practice was aided by the focus on teaching and learning.

Confidence in the source of the practice

Research studies confirm that people are more inclined to absorb and adopt practice from those they know and trust (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998; Fraser 1999). Good practice transfer is therefore more likely to take place when there is a close personal relationship between the source and recipient of the practice. The sharing of practice arising from informal personal contact or 'active' sharing through action research and development projects is likely to engender such trust. Without a more extended form of internal and/or external validation, however, such practice is unlikely to be more widely shared across a college.

In education and training, practice validated by external agencies is often seen to carry greater weight and authority than practice validated by internal means. The status attached to inspection criteria and judgements is particularly significant in this regard. Though provision for the sharing of good practice in not explicitly addressed in the Common Inspection Framework, the inspection process in post-16 learning has raised critical questions about the failure of many colleges to achieve consistent performance across all areas of learning. Colleges have been criticised for shortcomings in sharing good practice, though, significantly, few colleges have been commended for strengths in this area. Representative of this climate, two colleges in the study have successfully used inspection findings to develop sharing strategies aimed at reducing variations in performance between areas of learning; a further two colleges have been required to address perceived shortcomings in good practice transfer as part of their post-inspection plans.
While inspection reports provide the authority for good practice transfer, they offer limited guidance to providers on what constitutes good or best practice for benchmarking purposes and no advice on how to replicate good practice in particular settings. For these reasons, two of the case study colleges were reluctant to use inspection reports as a vehicle for sharing good internal practice. These colleges also had reservations about approaches that emphasised the strong helping the weak – this was viewed as a ‘deficiency’ model, where only the weak departments would benefit from good practice transfer. It was felt that this would undermine efforts to promote the sharing of good practice among all staff. For both colleges, the active involvement of staff in the process of validating, sharing and customising good practice through projects was crucial to gaining staff confidence and trust – vital elements for good practice transfer.

Because of their sensitivity to institutional context, internal processes for identifying and sharing good practice should, in principle, inspire greater trust than those carried out by external agencies. In practice, many college staff are reluctant to adopt practice that has been developed and validated in their own backyard. Until processes such as self-assessment, lesson observation and internal inspection establish the capacity and authority for turning good ideas at a local level into validated good practice at an institutional level, inspection will continue to function as the key driver for sharing good practice within many colleges.

Recognition of professional subcultures

Findings from inspection visits and preliminary evidence emerging from the Centre of Vocational Excellence programme suggest that many colleges face significant difficulties in transferring practice across curriculum areas.

Most of the colleges participating in this project spoke of the inclination of staff to protect local practice (‘my class, my course’). At worst, such attitudes are an expression of a form of a protectionism or parochialism. Departmental ‘fiefdoms’ in particular are a recognised feature of many colleges and present a major challenge to any strategy for the sharing of good internal practice. In a more positive light, teachers often seek to promote (or defend) local practice by reference to the needs of their particular area of learning. This raises fundamental questions about the capacity to translate good practice across curriculum or occupational areas.
A study by Becher and Trowler (2001) is instructive in this respect. In examining the links between academic cultures (‘tribes’) and their disciplinary knowledge (their ‘territories’), the authors illustrate how bodies of knowledge have a critical influence on the behaviour of individuals and departments within colleges. They also cite other research that identifies differences between disciplinary (in some cases sub-disciplinary) groups with respect to:

- teaching and learning
- conventions in postgraduate education
- relations between teaching and research
- aspects of staff development
- perceptions of quality issues
- the concept of academic standards
- approaches to departmental management.

Becher and Trowler are critical of development strategies that discount such differences between subject disciplines:

In most cases the identified contrasts between established cultural assumptions and practices can be seen to be overridden by uniform, undifferentiated policy requirements. In consequence such requirements can result in anomalous and insensitive impositions which are likely to be tacitly if not overtly rejected by those called on to adopt them. Becher and Trowler (2001, page 21)

This serves as a reminder that consideration must be given to the beliefs and values of the target audience when developing strategies for sharing good internal practice across a college. Such strategies must necessarily involve some measure of control over the work of staff and the departments within which they work. The issue is therefore how to exercise this control without undermining local needs. Structures, processes and values that facilitate cross-functional working will be necessary for this purpose.

**Cross-functional working**

One of the major barriers to sharing good practice within colleges is the perception that ‘we are different’.

Two of the colleges participating in this project sought to address this problem by demonstrating similarities as well as differences between areas of learning.
At College A, concerns had been expressed that learners in poorly performing curriculum areas had more challenging learning needs / attributes than others in better-performing areas. These perceptions were addressed by demonstrating that learners in Grade 1 areas had wide-ranging learning, support and emotional needs. Practical activities were used to show how standard processes could be differentiated to meet the needs of individual learners. This won over the doubters.

Similar efforts to demonstrate common features of learning processes were in evidence at College B, where staff from the college's prison sites carried out cross-college staff development sessions dealing with challenging student behaviour. Although the students were perceived to have different learning needs, the issue of how to deal with challenging behaviour was shown to be common to all students.

Both College A and College B have recognised the importance of developing a common understanding of practices to be shared. They also recognise that practices are not always easily transferable and that insensitivity to this fact can provoke resistance from staff.

College F recognises this by allowing standard practice to be customised where this is justified in relation to departments or learner needs. While standardisation is not enforced, standard good practice materials are available for use by departments as an 'endorsed' college package.

The guiding principle here is that the case for diversity should be demonstrated, not merely assumed. We may call this principle ‘rational diversity’. Diversity is ‘rational’ when practices are determined by reference to the needs of learners within a particular curriculum area rather than by custom and practice (at best) and protection of local interests (at worst). Devolved management systems within colleges often encourage ‘irrational diversity’ and inhibit opportunities for the sharing of good internal practice. Good practice transfer requires some form of ‘centralised decentralism’ (Hogget 1991) that retains departmental strengths but within centrally defined parameters, which limit departmental autonomy.

College A has sought to develop college-wide quality standards as a lever for good practice transfer. A Grade 3 or below in teaching and learning is deemed to be unacceptable. This acts as a trigger for support from other departments.

College F has also made a recent move towards a more cross-college approach to management and development. Although a schools structure is maintained, the schools are less autonomous and isolated than was previously the case.
Similarly, College C has centralised its approach to staff development to achieve more strategic targeted aims, including the sharing of good practice. The college nevertheless recognises that because of the complexity and range of provision within a large FE college, a bottom-up as well as top-down approach is necessary to support the identification and sharing of good practice.

All of the colleges participating in this project recognised the importance of developing a common culture that supports knowledge/skills-sharing.

At College B, the values of supportiveness, openness, listening and willingness to learn are promoted. The belief that ‘success breeds further success’ provides the rationale for sharing good practice. Staff are praised for demonstrating their work and ideas.

College C promoted the view that everyone can improve – improvement is what is being looked for, not the ‘gold standard’. Permission to make mistakes, and acknowledgement that improvement takes time, were also key values.

College D also emphasises the importance of encouraging experimentation and working within a no-blame culture.

Staff motivation

Any college-wide quality improvement initiative is likely to provoke a measure of scepticism or suspicion from staff. Teachers are invariably suspicious of central initiatives that may add to existing workloads or benefit managers rather than practitioners or learners. In the college case studies, fear of increased paperwork was cited as an inhibiting factor. Participants also referred to the tendency to overlay new practices on old ways of working. Staff resistance was also likely to occur where knowledge-sharing was seen to have ‘procedural’ aims and not to be focused directly on the needs of learners or staff.

All of the colleges recognised that good practice cannot be imposed; it can only be adopted with the agreement and support of staff. It is therefore necessary to be clear about the purposes and potential benefits of knowledge-sharing. Apart from demonstrating the business case for spreading good practice, it is important to show how staff can benefit personally from such activity. The practice must therefore be demonstrably relevant to the needs of the users and build on their current strengths.
The learning preferences of the target audience should also be considered when considering different approaches to sharing practice. Research studies (quoted in Office for Public Management 2002) confirm that:

- practitioners are more likely to favour database transfer methods
- senior managers/board members favour opportunities for networking
- teachers, more than other public servants, prefer interactive learning, videos, visits and demonstration lessons to written guidance.

In general, staff commit to sharing practice if it helps them do their jobs better and if the culture and values of the organisation support knowledge transfer. In some situations, however, it may be necessary to provide incentives to the owners and potential recipients of good practice to support knowledge transfer. In some organisations the commitment to – and capacity for – knowledge-sharing is a key factor in the recruitment and appraisal of staff. Such practice was not evidenced during the course of this project, though colleges were seeking to accredit good practice as part of professional development programmes.

- College F, for example, accredits good practice through its management development programme; this arrangement may be extended to development programmes for advanced practitioners.

**Funding and support**

Most of the project participants observed that colleges lack the financial or staff resources to promote the sharing of good practice. External funding may be necessary to kick-start college initiatives.

- Colleges A and B had used monies from the Standards Fund to develop approaches to the sharing of good internal practice between different programme areas.
- At College C, Standards Fund money had also been used to pay to release staff to participate in action research projects: ‘resourcing colleagues to talk to each other’, as the college described it.

In the absence of targeted external funding, colleges will need to find finance for such initiatives from core funding.

- At the end of Standards Funding, College A will continue to commit 1% of its staff budget to core funding for staff development that is integral to the college’s approach to good practice transfer. It had also, like other case study colleges, reorganised timetables and planned ‘away days’ to allow staff to meet and share practice.
Senior managers also need to demonstrate a personal commitment to, and support for, the sharing of good internal practice. They may need to appoint ‘knowledge brokers’ with a specific brief for promoting the sharing and transfer of good practice (see also ‘Knowledge brokers’ on page 11). Some colleges had developed new roles for this purpose, such as mentors and advanced practitioners.

- College D employed an external consultant to act as a knowledge broker with the time, influence and expertise to kick-start college initiatives in developing and sharing good practice.

Colleges recognised that such cross-college posts could be expensive and that it could be difficult to evaluate their worth.

- At College F, a new learner mentoring system had been delayed because of the difficulties of releasing staff from their teaching commitments.

- In colleges where staffing support had been adequately targeted for the sharing of good practice, initiatives often foundered due to a lack of resources for follow-up activity, necessary to ensure good practice transfer.

A college-wide approach to the sharing of good practice should be carefully planned and coordinated. It may be possible to improve or develop existing processes, rather than putting in new, ‘free-standing’ initiatives. Self-assessment, for example, is perhaps too often targeted at addressing weaknesses for improvement rather than extending good practice.

Colleges were mindful of the need to avoid initiative fatigue and to exploit opportunities for informal sharing. They also acknowledged, however, that such opportunities were diminishing with the erosion of lunch/coffee breaks and the loss of staffroom facilities.

Colleges need to consider the cost-benefit implications of strategies for the sharing of good practice. The opportunity costs of failing to adopt or engage with knowledge-sharing initiatives should be persuasive enough. College D, for example, in recognition of the hidden costs of failing to engage with this type of activity, had developed a strong conviction that a small investment in time had big potential rewards. To demonstrate these benefits it is necessary to measure the impact of good practice transfer.

Measurement of impact

As part of the process of winning hearts and minds, organisations may in the first instance wish to nurture the culture necessary to support good practice transfer, rather than seeking measurable evidence of improvement. Without measurable success, however, it is difficult to demonstrate actual benefits to staff and thereby maintain progress over time (O’Dell and Grayson 1998).
Measures of the impact of good practice transfer within colleges might include:

- new programme/service development
- learner recruitment (college growth)
- learner satisfaction/results
- employee satisfaction/development
- more effective/efficient processes
- organisational learning, eg continuous professional development.

Research studies suggest that the capacity to measure the impact of good practice transfer is the least well-developed aspect of knowledge transfer within most organisations (O’Dell and Grayson 1998). This was borne out by this project – scant evidence was found of a systematic approach to the monitoring of good practice transfer, with even less attention being given to measuring impact. This in turn reflected the lack of any overall strategy for sharing good practice.

Some colleges have been able to use inspection grades to demonstrate improvements arising for the sharing of internal practice.

- At College A, monitoring re-inspection was used to assess the progress of Grade 4 departments that had been supported by a Grade 1 department. In an attempt to carry this forward, senior practitioners from the (former) Grade 4 programmes were used to convey improvements to other departments through institutional staff development days.

- At College D, the transfer of good practice was an inherent component of the action research projects – this was, in effect, what staff had to ‘sign up to’ when they undertook an action research project.

Development activities typically result in action plans that are subject to follow-up monitoring and corrective action. Evidence of improvement resulting from these activities is, however, mainly anecdotal. Although performance indicators are commonly used to assess the outcomes of improvement projects, the problems of establishing cause-and-effect relationships for projects centred on the sharing of good practice were noted by a number of project participants. Typically, improvement targets were not set for this purpose.
To facilitate good practice transfer, the outcomes of knowledge-sharing initiatives should be clearly defined. College C seeks to set clear outcomes for action research/development projects – if the project doesn't work, time and financial benefits are withdrawn. Expectations should be set at an appropriate level. This is not always the case. Ambitions may be set too high (without recognising the inherent difficulties of raising standards across all areas of provision) or too low (lack of clear and challenging targets for improvement).
Developing a strategy for sharing good practice within colleges

A strategy for sharing good internal practice should build on the principles of knowledge management.

For O’Dell and Grayson (1998, page 6) knowledge management is: ‘a conscious strategy of getting the right knowledge to the right people at the right time and helping people to share and put information into action in ways that strive to improve organizational performance’.

For Svieby and Lloyd (1987) the object of knowledge management is to help an organisation to act intelligently to achieve success and to realise its ‘intellectual capital’ – the knowledge and abilities of its staff, not just its financial or material assets.

For many authors, knowledge management is inextricably linked to organisational success. O’Dell and Grayson (1998) believe that:

Only those organizations that methodically, passionately and proactively find out and transfer what they know and use it to increase efficiency, sharpen their product development edge and get close to their customers will not only survive but excel.

O’Dell and Grayson (1998)

Set against these criteria we may pose the question: do colleges have effective strategies for sharing good internal practice in order to optimise their overall performance?

Key findings

The following answers have emerged from this project.

- Colleges use a range of processes for identifying good internal practice. These processes have typically been developed over time, in relatively unstructured ways, without any overarching strategy, policy or plan.

- Colleges often place greater confidence in internal practice that has been externally validated (particularly through inspection), despite reduced sensitivity to institutional context.

- Many good ideas remain unexploited in colleges because staff do not recognise their own good practice or lack the opportunity to have it validated.

- Colleges have developed a range of mechanisms for sharing good internal practice. Again, many of these have been developed over time, in relatively unstructured ways, without any overarching strategy, policy or plan.
Colleges have sought to raise awareness of good practice through databases and intranet technologies. Very few colleges, however, have sought to monitor staff access to, and use of, good practice materials from these sources.

Professional development is a key activity for promoting knowledge/skills-sharing within colleges. Few colleges, however, have used recruitment and appraisal processes for this purpose.

Colleges offer few tangible incentives for sharing good practice other than time release.

Colleges recognise the importance of actively engaging staff in the process of knowledge/skills-sharing and transfer, for example action research projects, professional development activity, and training on implementation planning following dissemination events.

Colleges have established posts specifically focused on identifying and sharing good practice, eg advanced practitioners. Some colleges have appointed the equivalent of ‘knowledge brokers’ with a dedicated brief to facilitate the transfer of good practice.

External funding has often been necessary to kick-start college initiatives. Though core funding has been used to maintain such programmes, no college has carried out the kind of cost-benefit analysis that might be necessary to sustain the funding of initiatives in the longer term.

While colleges have developed a range of methods for sharing good internal practice, less attention has been given to provision for monitoring good practice transfer.

Few colleges have sought systematically to measure the impact of good practice transfer or to set targets for improvement. In the absence of such measures it is difficult to demonstrate the benefits of good practice transfer or to identify strategies that work.

Most colleges have pursued a values-driven approach to sharing good practice. Some have also sought to develop the structures and processes necessary to support cross-functional working.

No college involved in this study, however, has developed an overall strategy for sharing good internal practice. One college (College D) has identified the sharing of good practice as a key feature of its overall mission. For other colleges, good practice transfer was subsumed implicitly as an aspect of their overall quality improvement strategy.
10 elements of a successful strategy

Based on these assumptions and findings, what then would/should a strategy for sharing good internal practice look like and why should colleges adopt it?

The findings generated from this research suggest that a strategy for sharing good internal practice could be built on the following 10 elements:

1. formal and informal ways of identifying good ideas within the college
2. internal and external mechanisms for validating good practice
3. the incorporation of good internal practice into college policies and processes
4. the use of ICT systems to disseminate good practice
5. passive and active ways of sharing good practice
6. skills development to facilitate good practice transfer
7. arrangements for monitoring the transfer of good practice
8. ways of measuring the impact of good practice transfer
9. identification of the barriers to good practice transfer and how these will be addressed
10. methods for evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of the strategy.

Implicit in this set of assumptions is the existence of a formalised and managed process for sharing good practice and an organisational culture capable of supporting that process.

The strategy should identify how the college is seeking to address the factors that support and inhibit internal good practice transfer, as identified in the previous section of this report. The Framework for Knowledge Management Planning devised by Skyrme (1999) and shown in Figure 1 is a useful starting point for this purpose. Skyrme’s framework incorporates eight of the nine critical success factors listed above, the exception being external drivers:
Skyrme's framework provides a basis for colleges wanting to adopt a formalised structure and strategy for spreading good practice.

- The ‘enablers’ in this instance suggest that a culture that fosters and enables the sharing of practice for the common purpose has to be promoted and the climate in which colleges operate needs to promote an openness that challenges any notion of tribes or cliques. Organisational cultures should create and stimulate innovation and learning. College managers need to dedicate attention and resources to facilitating such a culture.

- Skyrme identifies the ‘levers’ as the ‘organization's activities’ that have the potential of the Gestalt effect – of making any development project, for example, greater than the sum of its parts. In essence, the success of an activity that has been put in place to improve practice requires a counter-activity that takes forward any improvement to other/all areas.

- The ‘foundations’ relate to the infrastructures needed to ensure that any strategy is deliverable and communicable. Are the IT mechanisms for sharing practice in place and accessible? Are the continuing professional development activities needed to transform roles, skills and knowledge available?

This process must be viewed holistically and by no means as hierarchical. To be fully functional and successful, the process must be all-embracing.
Implications for providers and national agencies

For providers

Many of the college representatives contacted as part of this research acknowledged the potential benefits of introducing a more strategic approach to sharing good practice. Such a strategy would:

■ help colleges to foster a more integrated, multifaceted approach to knowledge/skills-sharing
■ help colleges to establish structures, processes and the culture necessary to support good practice transfer
■ help colleges to develop measures for assessing the costs and benefits of good practice transfer
■ provide a key indicator of the college’s approach to quality improvement in their dealings with external agencies.

For national agencies

While the findings of this project are directed mainly at college practices, the report does raise important questions about the role of the inspectorates, the LSC and the new DfES Standards Unit in promoting the internal sharing of good practice within colleges.

The prime focus of inspection in post-16 learning is on performance within areas of learning. In the CIF, ‘leadership and management’ are assessed mainly in terms of the effectiveness of management processes in supporting the quality of education and training within curriculum/occupational areas. Strategic issues – such as the organisational capacity to share good practice in order to optimise performance across all areas of learning – are not explicitly addressed within the inspection framework. There is also no clear indication in inspection reports of what constitutes good practice in knowledge/skills-sharing. These matters might usefully be addressed in any future review of the inspection framework and process.
College approaches to the sharing of good practice also have important implications for the quality improvement strategies of the LSC. A recognised characteristic of ‘middle band’ and ‘coasting’ colleges is their uneven performance across curriculum areas. Targeted strategies aimed at improving internal knowledge-sharing would therefore be of value for this group of colleges. Similarly, if a defining characteristic of ‘excellent’ colleges is their capacity to achieve consistently high performance across all aspects of provision, the experience of such colleges in promoting internal knowledge-sharing should be used to inform strategies for sharing good practice with other learning providers. All of this suggests that a much greater focus needs to be placed on good practice transfer as part of the framework for Provider Performance Review. Significantly, suitability for Beacon status now includes ‘the assessment of their [providers’] willingness and capacity to share good practice in collaborative partnership activity’ (LSC 2003b). In pursuance of the aims of the Centre of Vocational Excellence initiative, further consideration should be given to the factors that support or inhibit the sharing of good practice in Centres of Vocational Excellence within colleges.

The work of the Standards Unit in identifying and sharing good practice within curriculum/occupational areas attests to the importance of recognising professional subcultures when developing organisation-wide quality improvement strategies. Set against this is the danger that such approaches can reinforce academic territories and lead to a form of ‘balkanisation’ that divides the organisation into small, sometimes hostile divisions, at the expense of opportunities for cross-functional working.
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Appendix 1 Towards a typology for spreading good practice

As the previous sections have enumerated, the most effective means of spreading good practice is to adopt an active strategy that is deliberate and planned.

All of the factors below have the potential to provide the impetus for action, for institutions to seek ways and means of balancing out differential departmental performance.

■ An active strategy may, for example, stem from the institution's mission statement, although a more detailed strategy for turning that mission into reality will be necessary.

■ Informal approaches – mechanisms can be put in place to maximise the chance of more personal and interactive approaches taking place, whereby colleagues can chat about their own practice and seek input from their peers. In a college environment, this could translate into the provision of a staffroom to promote interactions and the sharing of stories about what works well or what is not working well.

■ The ethos and culture of the institution are liable to impact greatly on the success, or otherwise, of such approaches. It is imperative that a trusting working environment is engendered, that those seeking to spread their practice can do so without fear or prejudice, and also that others feel able to modify that practice so that it best meets their own needs. Where possible, this will most usefully be specified in the implementation strategy that activates the mission statement.

■ The external environment exerts some pressure and influence. It is likely, for example, that inspection (pre- and post-) will influence the focus (time, energy and commitment) given to the spreading of good practice.

■ Technology and technological developments can ease the communications between colleagues and provide a vehicle for spreading good practice.

■ Political pressure may come from burgeoning attention being paid to retention and achievement.

High-impact approaches

Proven high-impact approaches ideally need to be captured and cultivated. For energy to be spent on the circulation of information but for it to have little or no impact is a waste of time and effort. For example, attending a conference or staff development day and identifying possible actions that could improve practice but taking no action on returning to work makes the dissemination of good practice pointless.
The impact of sharing good practice strategies is likely to vary from case to case. For example, attendance at a conference could have little or no impact on one college or individual, while another may be profoundly affected. This depends on the individual’s receptivity and commitment to improving their practice, as these will influence the degree of implementation and further dissemination on their return to the working environment.

Ideally, for every action taken to spread good practice, an associated impact measurement should be visible. This requires action to be taken and the outcome of that action to be monitored. This follows the model established by Joyce and Showers (1988), in which feedback and coaching are ideal catalysts for the successful sharing of good practice.

Figure 2 plots some activities for sharing good practice. A number of assumptions are made about these activities, primarily that participants have a commitment to improving their practice and that they respond positively and actively to what has been shared by taking it further still. Activities include the following.

- **Websites and newsletters** it is relatively easy to disseminate information shared via a website or newsletter. However, monitoring its impact is less transparent. Furthermore, it will only have an impact if the recipient takes action as a result of the flow of information.

- **Lesson observation** assuming that lesson observations are followed by feedback, action planning and review/coaching, then the impact of this activity will be high.

- **Self-assessment** similarly, assuming that self-assessment is accompanied by an active approach to sharing any good practice that has been identified and then making it part of any development planning, then it will have a high impact.

- **Conferences/seminars** events such as conferences and seminars are frequently used as vehicles for sharing good practice. However, while they can inspire attendees during the event, all too often that inspiration and any motivation to effect change is lost when delegates return to the workplace. To maximise the impact of conferences and seminars, a more supportive approach needs to be adopted, as advocated by Showers et al. (1987) and Joyce and Showers (1988).

- **Shared drives** having systems that allow colleagues to tap into information developed in another department/school, such as an intranet, can help prevent people from reinventing the wheel. If colleagues do not feel comfortable sharing their systems or do not discuss what they have available, or if the shared drive is not accessed, then the activities are rendered useless.
Figure 2  Activities for spreading good practice

- Visits
- Toolkits
- Conferences
- Handbooks
- Seminars
- Shadowing
- Coaching
- Consultancy
- Process benchmarking
- Peer supported workshops
- Lesson observation
- Action research
- Interactive
  - websites
  - shared drives
- Open days
- Handbooks
- Seminars
- Conferences
- Networks
- Forums
- Working groups
- Advanced practitioners
- Self-assessment
- Action research
- Websites
- Shared drives
- High impact
- Low impact
- External drivers
- Passive strategy
- Organisational strategy
- Active strategy
- External drivers
Figure 2 shows that it is almost impossible to have a high-impact activity that adopts a passive way of transmitting information and practice. For any training or development to have an impact, it needs to be put into practice actively and supported by opportunities for feedback, reflection and coaching. Assuming that this is the case here, a passive strategy and high impact appear irreconcilable. This is aptly demonstrated by e-learning – the received wisdom is that e-learning is more effective when blended with other inputs, such as e-tutoring or face-to-face tutorials.

**The process of spreading good practice**

Having identified those strategies that are likely to have the greatest impact, the process of making the most effective use of the information they generate needs to be unravelled.

Spreading good practice can be operationalised on more than one level. Both the institution and the individual operating within that institution can seek to spread good practice. This can occur through more personal, interactive and informal means or through more formal and orchestrated measures implemented across the organisation. The process itself differs, depending on whether it is an individual or an institutional response, as illustrated in Figure 3.

![Figure 3 Procedural aspects for spreading good practice](image-url)
Example of institutional response: lesson observation

Note: This is an institutional response because it is a college-wide system and requires an action plan as a result of the observation. Actions can be (but are not necessarily) about dissemination.

- Identify good practice through lesson observation
- Validation comes as a result of the observer being an ‘expert’
- Observation recorded (on designated forms) and held on central database
- Action points agreed between observer/ee, including the dissemination of aspects of good practice to course team
- Transfer occurs when course team agrees to implement new practice(s)
- Impact monitored and improvements to learner outcomes discussed
- Job satisfaction improves as learner outcomes improve and targets are met – reward

Example of individual response: attendance at a staff development conference

- Attend conference and learn about existing good practice
- Identify and acknowledge aspects of that practice that you want to adopt and note on post-event personal action plan
- Accept new ways of working by trying out new approach based on the good practice
- Share your new ways of working and the associated outcomes with colleagues – dissemination could occur through coaching colleagues on the new approach
- Encourage colleague to refine the approach to suit their needs
- Try again (re-implementation) – the good practice is spreading across the institution
- Measure impact to assess the success of the good practice
Appendix 2 Interview schedule

This interview schedule was used as a prompt in the semi-structured interviews conducted with staff in the case study colleges as part of the research for this report.

The researchers used a grounded-theory approach. Grounded theory is a technique that allows the research process to unfold as the findings evolve. The rationale of grounded theory is that it enables the researcher to understand the phenomenon they are exploring, predominantly through observations (participatory or otherwise), conversations and interviews. The emergent findings are constantly compared with each other to ensure that findings are both robust and valid.
Does (how does) your college seek to:

- identify good practice (internally and externally)?
- validate good practice?
- record good practice?
- disseminate good practice?
- transfer good practice?
- measure the impact of good practice transfer?

Does your college have a ‘strategy’ for the sharing of good practice?
Who is responsible for this ‘strategy’?

What are the aims of this ‘strategy’ (explicit and/or implied)?

What are the (internal/external) factors that support the transfer of good internal practice?

What are the (internal/external) factors that inhibit the transfer of good internal practice?

What strategies are used to address the factors that inhibit the transfer of good practice?

What are the drivers for colleges when pursuing excellence and good practice college-wide? What role does inspection play in this – if at all?

**Notes for interviewers**

Sensitively explore inspection results – investigate disparity in inspection grades across areas of learning; what has been done to mediate the situation (if anything); how successful has it been, etc.

Stories and instances of how good practice has been shared, the reaction it evoked and the impact it then had should be sought to illustrate all points.

Supporting documentation having relevance throughout the whole process of spreading good practice will be welcomed.
The Support for Success Quality Improvement Programme is funded by the Learning and Skills Council and delivered by the Learning and Skills Development Agency in partnership with the Association of Colleges and Inclusion.

The Support for Success Quality Improvement Programme is part of successforall.

The Support for Success Quality Improvement Programme aims to help providers to:

- share good practice
- enhance their capacity for self-improvement
- devise targets and development plans
- be more responsive to the needs of learners, employers and communities
- develop a customer-focused approach to quality improvement
- improve in areas of underperformance.