

LSDA reports

**Raising achievement at
Levels 1 and 2**

Paul Martinez

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Feedback should be sent to:
Information Services
Learning and Skills Development Agency
Regent Arcade House, 19–25 Argyll Street
London W1F 7LS.
Tel 020 7297 9000
Fax 020 7297 9001
enquiries@LSDA.org.uk

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Further information

For further information on the issues discussed
in this publication please contact:

Anna Reisenberger
Quality Improvement Programmes Manager
Learning and Skills Development Agency
Regent Arcade House, 19–25 Argyll Street
London W1F 7LS.
Tel 020 7297 9000
areisenberger@LSDA.org.uk

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Introduction

The Learning and Skills Council, OFSTED and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) have all emphasised the need to improve retention and achievement on programmes at Levels 1 and 2. This report provides a summary of, and guide to, strategies that have been developed and applied successfully in colleges to improve student outcomes on lower level programmes.

It is based on an analysis of work in over 20 colleges. Most of this work has been reported as part of previous rounds of Raising Quality and Achievement (RQA) Programme development projects, funded by the DfES. Some of the case studies were prepared for a parallel research project: *Secrets of success [at Levels 1 and 2]* (Hull 2000). The RQA case studies can be searched and downloaded from the RQA website (www.rqa.org.uk). Some colleges have case studies in both Round 1 and Round 2, and readers will need to check that they have the relevant case study. The electronic version of this report has hypertext links so that you can click straight on to the case study on the RQA website. Appendix 1 lists the case study colleges referred to in this report. Appendix 2 provides the references and suggestions for further reading.

The synthesis in this report is the author's, but it would not have been possible without the pioneering and dedicated efforts of hundreds of teachers, curriculum managers and support workers in colleges. In order to acknowledge the source of this work and to provide a guide to the reader, all quotations, together with all strategies, interventions and innovations that are reported here, are referenced to the relevant college case study.

If the report has a major limitation, however, it is in the scope of its coverage. Most of the case studies focus on younger, full-time students aged 16–18. Other work (Martinez 2000) suggests strongly that problems and solutions for older, part-time learners will be different. It may be possible to make some cautious inferences concerning Level 1 and 2 programmes designed for older students, but more work is needed.

The purpose of this report

This report provides:

- an aid to diagnosing problems that need to be addressed to raise achievement at Levels 1 and 2
- some suggestions for possible improvement strategies.

The aid to diagnosis is particularly important. At the risk of stating the obvious, 'you cannot fix something, if you don't know what's broken'. There are many changes that could be introduced to improve retention, attendance and achievement. RQA case studies to date demonstrate unequivocally the importance of identifying and working on the changes that will have the greatest impact.

Diagnosing the issues

Broadly speaking, previous RQA case studies identify three approaches to problem diagnosis:

- cross college
- targeted
- mixed.

Accrington and Rossendale College provides an example of a cross-college approach. The emphasis is on identifying a range of issues which are more or less common across Level 2 programmes and developing strategies which could be applied and embedded across the organisation.

South East Essex College provides an example of a more targeted approach. Programmes at Level 2 which seemed to be performing less well than other programmes were identified and each programme analysed its own issues, then developed and implemented change strategies.

Bishop Burton College provides an example of a more mixed approach. Curriculum managers from targeted courses worked together to identify both common issues *and* issues within individual programmes.

Whichever approach is adopted, the point is that *without a diagnostic phase* improvement efforts will be less successful than they should be.

Issues at Levels 1 and 2

DfES and the Learning and Skills Council have both signalled the importance of improving achievement on lower level programmes of study.

The most obvious initial question is:

Is there anything special about Levels 1 and 2?

In other words, will improvement efforts on lower level courses differ significantly from those directed at, for example, Advanced level programmes? There are probably as many points of similarity as there are of difference, but Levels 1 and 2 seem different in three major aspects:

- learner issues
- teaching issues
- college culture and strategy issues.

Learner issues

Students from Foundation and Intermediate level programmes are different from Advanced level students in at least two ways. First, and above all, these learners have not reached the intended standard of attainment at 16 which is expressed as the equivalent of 5 A–C GCSE passes. These learners are, therefore, accessing a second chance in college. They are variously characterised in the case studies as disadvantaged, vulnerable or unconfident learners who may have unrealistic or inappropriate expectations of their programmes and relatively underdeveloped learning skills. Background and predisposing factors could include:

- lack of opportunity to access appropriate curriculum or support at school
- long-term stress arising from dysfunctional family units
- abusive and neglectful backgrounds
- effects of time spent in care
- social deprivation
- low academic esteem and stigma associated with school failure
- very individualised learning styles (East Surrey College).

For these learners, their apparently positive view of college as 'more adult' or 'grown up' than school may be as much an expression of dislike and disenchantment towards their school as of attraction towards college.

Typically, college students on full-time Intermediate courses have been failed by their school or have under achieved pre-16. The depth of their disenchantment with school was striking.

(Capel Manor College)

Levels 1 and 2 learners are, secondly, very diverse. In one sense, of course, all learners are diverse. The reasons for under or low achievement at school are so many and varied, however, that this seems to be particularly true of Foundation and Intermediate level students. Uxbridge College's Foundation programme includes students:

- who had 'missed' formal schooling as a result of behavioural or educational issues; these are often numerous and range from exclusions to school phobia and illness
- who are refugees newly arriving into the country, many with English language learning needs
- with learning difficulties who have progressed from other college courses or special schools
- with a wide range of academic abilities
- with very diverse educational, social and personal backgrounds and experiences.

Teaching issues

FE teachers are still wrestling with the changes that have taken place since incorporation in 1993. In no particular order of priority these include larger classes, longer teaching hours, more administration, teaching on more programmes across a wider range, curriculum and pedagogic change and a greater focus on individual student learning programmes. The net effect is to reduce the time and energy available for preparation, let alone for quality improvement work.

A further order of change is associated with the student cohort itself. As further education has expanded its mission and broadened its curriculum base, many teachers may find themselves teaching groups of students with particular needs, with which they are unfamiliar, on lower level programmes with which they may also be relatively unfamiliar.

Another consequence may be that the way that teachers conceptualise their teaching may not be appropriate for Foundation and Intermediate students.

...the formal precision and objective nature of the GNVQ Foundation course meant that the pressure for teaching to become standardised and increasingly efficient was overwhelming ... there became a deep-felt tension between the reasons staff had entered further education teaching initially and what they were now being asked to do. Staff saw themselves as becoming increasingly de-skilled in the name of up-skilling others. Teaching on the Foundation course became an unpopular option; those that did teach on it saw advantages in the lack of preparation required as teaching methods became focused on highly structured worksheets. There was little or no attempt to acknowledge the students' previous experience or their future goals and aspirations...

The teaching strategies that have been adopted place little emphasis on helping students to become effective learners and there developed a misguided, polarised view of key skills and vocational knowledge.

(Lewisham College)

This is not to criticise or to seek to allocate blame but to recognise that making a transition to what might be termed 'inclusive teaching' may be quite a problematic process at Levels 1 and 2.

College culture and strategy issues

There is little *direct* evidence of the impact of college culture in the case studies. Anecdotally, however, case study writers acknowledge that there is an issue.

If culture is defined as the values that motivate behaviour and are embedded in the stories, procedures, systems, strategies and symbols of college life, there is a strong suggestion that in some colleges, Foundation and Intermediate programmes are seen as less prestigious than Advanced level courses or HE provision. Institution strategy, as we shall see, also influences the curriculum, staffing, structure and resourcing of lower level programmes.



Learner issues

Research has generally failed to find motivational or attitudinal factors which pre-dispose students to complete, or drop out from, their courses.

There is, however, a broad consensus that developing and maintaining motivation on programme is imperative (Huntingdonshire Regional College). Many teaching and curriculum strategies at Levels 1 and 2 are designed with student motivation in mind. These are reviewed below under six broad headings:

- celebrating success
- parental involvement
- group dynamics
- attendance monitoring and follow up
- learning skills
- learning support.

Celebrating success

Huddersfield New College has developed two sorts of award ceremony. Presentation evenings in January give students, friends and parents the opportunity to celebrate the success of students in the previous year and a certificate evening marks the progression from Foundation to Intermediate and from Intermediate to Advanced level.

Bury College awards college certificates for the completion of each unit. Uxbridge has introduced a variety of accreditation and award opportunities on its Foundation programme so that students will achieve and celebrate success at the end of each of its six or seven week teaching blocks.

West Suffolk College marks the progress of its Catering and Hospitality students through:

- a student of the month award
- monthly meetings between all students and staff
- fast-track NVQ opportunities
- feedback and praise from 'mystery customers' drawn from the local hotel and catering industry.

Parental involvement

From nursery onwards parents tend to be less involved with school but several colleges developed supportive links with parents through:

- a parent consultation evening and reports from subject and tutor reviews (Huddersfield New College)
- a parent's induction evening in September, followed by a progress review evening in December (Solihull Sixth Form College)
- regular reporting to parents (Burton College)
- a welcome buffet/open evening for all parents of new students (West Suffolk College).

The thinking behind parental involvement strategies can be summarised in the reasons behind the buffet at West Suffolk:

This is a key opportunity to briefly outline the course structure, timetabling and joint expectations as well as an opportunity for parents to meet all staff on the teaching team. This helped [parents] put a face to a name should it be necessary for a tutor to contact them during the course. It also allowed us to explain the cause for concern system to parents directly. The evening was a relaxed and informal affair which emphasised the support and commitment required by all parties to help students achieve their learning goal.

(West Suffolk College)

Group dynamics

Most colleges try to establish a group ethos during induction or in the early stages of a course through ice breaking and team-building activities. Two case studies report in some detail specific efforts to improve group dynamics.

Croydon involved youth workers to help resolve some dysfunctional group dynamics between demotivated (mainly young male) and motivated (mainly young female) students, by increasing group cohesion and raising self-esteem.

The East Surrey College case study reports a range of teacher and tutor interventions and the changing role and relationship between tutor and students. At the heart of this account is the 'affective side of the learner-tutor relationship at [Intermediate] level'. In the words of the report:

The heart of the group must always be maintained throughout. It is the tutor's role to stay with the heart of the group. For example, many students will have long periods of absence. Phone calls home may have little effect. What brings the student back is the energy that is the group. As the student is unable to perceive their own intellectual self interest, there has to be an emotional/social reason for returning. The heart of the group provides this.

(East Surrey College)

Attendance

Most of the case studies refer to creating expectations of attendance, associated with prompt follow up of absence, usually by a phone call home (Huddersfield New College, Tamworth and Lichfield College, Huntingdonshire Regional College, Accrington and Rossendale and West Herts colleges). Bury College instituted early morning phone calls if a student was over half an hour late. An illustration of the rigour of the approach of some colleges is given below:

A caring but strict culture was developed. Attendance was compulsory and absent students telephoned at home at the first sign of absence. A floor check was carried out twice a day to make sure students were in class.

(Burton College)

Several colleges offer incentives or rewards for good attendance including:

- attendance certificates and money-off vouchers (for the refectory) (Bury College)
- college scholarships (Accrington and Rossendale College).

Innovative approaches can be found at Accrington and Rossendale and Askham Bryan colleges. At the former, teachers create 'extra student files' of handouts and course materials provided to students who miss sessions.

Askham Bryan College noted that some absences were associated with parts of programmes that learners found particularly difficult. They therefore investigated absences to see if they were caused by problems on the programme or by something else. If the problems were course related, the college helped students to overcome the learning problem rather than taking a more disciplinary approach. In the words of the case study:

If students learned to accept that problems can be tackled by understanding small amounts of information and success is noted from each learning step, then confidence in their own learning ability is built or, in some cases, restored.

(Askham Bryan College)

Learning skills and styles

A number of colleges report that the Improve your own Learning and Performance (IoLP) key skill helps to improve student learning (Lewisham College, Huddersfield New College, Capel Manor College). Capel Manor College includes its IoLP documentation in its case study.

Sometimes student learning skills are conceptualised largely in the form of a deficit model where the task of a teacher is to 'give' students the skills to succeed. Action research at Askham Bryan College suggests that this is too simplistic a view. In the words of the case study:

The interpretation of language and the difference between spoken and written discussion was an obstacle to progression for many students. It hampered their ability to communicate their ideas and their understanding of the application of the knowledge they had relating to animal care. Some of the problems came from the low skills base of the students, but other problems arose from the language that was being employed by the teaching staff.

(Askham Bryan College)

The solution here was to review and adapt ways of managing classroom communications, developing teaching strategies and reviewing the assessment task specifications.

Other colleges have concentrated more on learning styles and preferences. Huntingdonshire Regional College uses learning style self-assessment instruments followed by discussions in group tutorials to:

- make students aware of their own learning preferences
- encourage them to develop other ways to learn
- develop student skills in self-observation and reflection.

Students at Foundation and Intermediate level tend to prefer activist learning styles and to feel less comfortable with more abstract and theoretical learning. This was confirmed at Capel Manor College where teachers responded to strongly expressed student preferences for:

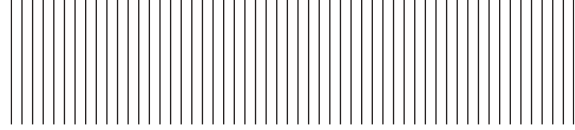
- learning by doing, moderated by commentary from other students and tutors
- tutor feedback in correcting mistakes
- theoretical learning integrated with practical experience.

Learning support

Most of the case study colleges seem to have quite robust initial assessment procedures for full-time students on lower level programmes. These can be extensive, utilising formal and informal interviews, school references, proprietary tests (eg Basic Skills Agency (BSA), Sheffield College, etc), personal action planning and induction assignments (Huddersfield New College, Burton and Uxbridge colleges). In these colleges, at least, the problems of poorly designed, inappropriate or invalid initial assessment identified in earlier research (Green and Bartram 1998) seem to have been resolved. Further guidance on effective initial assessment can be found in the guide published by the DfEE (2001).

The issue that seems to cause most concern is the high proportion (up to 80%) of students who fail to access the learning support they need. Strategies to ensure students access the support they need include:

- timetabling students into a study centre to ensure familiarity and overcome any stigma (Huddersfield New College)
- learning support registration and follow up of absence by personal tutors (Accrington and Rossendale College)
- embedding learning support in the curriculum through team teaching, staff development and contextualising learning materials (Nelson and Colne College, Leeds College of Technology, High Pavement Sixth Form College)
- in-class learning assistants (Askham Bryan College).



Learners 'at risk'

Two colleges developed specific 'at risk' procedures. Hard and soft data was analysed to identify the sort of factors associated with students dropping out or failing to succeed. The list of factors was shared with personal tutors and a variety of intervention strategies were designed to deal with them. Accrington and Rossendale and Croydon colleges give very full accounts of the strategies and procedures they developed.

Teaching issues

Given the initial analysis of the specific issues at Levels 1 and 2, it seems sensible to distinguish teaching from college issues. These are, nevertheless, quite fluid categories. In a small college, for example, curriculum may be a whole college issue. In a large college, curriculum policy and strategy may be determined at the level of an individual school, department or even programme area. This report separates issues that teachers directly influence and control from those where decisions are more likely to be made centrally. Teaching issues are divided into pre-enrolment and induction, and on-programme.

Pre-enrolment and induction

Most of the strategies for lower level programmes reported here seem to be quite similar to those for other levels, reported elsewhere (Martinez 1997 and 2000). They fall into three main types:

- information and student preparation
- recruitment and selection
- induction.

Information and student preparation

Some colleges reviewed and revised the information they gave to potential students (and their parents) to communicate more relevant information more effectively about the realities of study, progression opportunities and how low level programmes fitted into other programmes in the same college.

This was done through:

- programme area booklets (Lewisham College)
- taster days (South East Essex College)
- course handbooks aimed at both students and parents (Tamworth and Lichfield College).

Two colleges developed 'student preparation' activities. In Stockport, the School Links programme included Year 10 and Year 11 school students who undertook a mixture of taster activities and NVQ 1 programmes. The colleges found that not only did this help the development of relationships with prospective students,

but students who had gone through the programme could act as mentors for new students in September. Completion of Foundation level NVQs also created opportunities for accelerated progression (Stockport CFHE). Leeds College of Technology, by contrast, created a 3-week intensive summer school for its prospective automotive vehicle engineering students. This ensured:

- more intensive initial assessment
- a greater state of readiness among students in September
- a better student understanding of what the programme was really like
- action planning.

Recruitment and selection

The main changes to selection procedures at Levels 1 and 2 in the case study colleges involved greater rigour allied to more two-way communication. In the Intermediate GNVQ Health and Social Care at Lewisham, the selection process was extended to include:

- a writing and comprehension task
- more discussion with students and a greater emphasis on checking student understanding of the outcomes of the discussion
- a new interview schedule to include a checklist of information to be given during the interview.

These changes were supported by staff development and guidance for new members of staff. In a set of slightly different but parallel changes in a sixth form college (Huddersfield New College), interviews:

- are conducted by a senior member of staff
- require school references and school predictions of GCSE results
- include an examination of records of achievement
- lead to an offer of a guaranteed place but where the level is confirmed after GCSE results.

In Solihull Sixth Form College, in addition, selection was introduced for internal progression from Intermediate to Advanced GNVQ. Given any doubt about ability to succeed at Advanced level, the student is offered a provisional place subject to the successful completion of an action plan.

At the same time, the selection process seems to be extended to include a greater role for information and advice to:

- ensure clarity about what is expected, the demands of the programme of study and mutual responsibilities (South East Essex College)
- include taster activities and mutual appraisal (Capel Manor College)
- broaden the discussion of students' progress at school beyond an exclusive focus on projected GCSE outcomes (Walsall College of Arts and Technology).

Induction

The idea of induction as a process that can take place over an extended period and be run in parallel with the start of the study programme seems to be more or less accepted. A great deal of thought has clearly gone into identifying the desired social, cognitive and affective outcomes of induction. A number of the case studies give detailed accounts of the processes they have developed to achieve:

- greater self-confidence, a group ethos and a positive relationship with tutors in the first three days (Lewisham College)
- familiarity with sources of support and realistic expectations of the course by half-term (Lewisham College)
- friendship groups (South East Essex College)
- a sense of group identity and productive student–student and student–tutor relationships (East Surrey College).

The Health and Social Care Intermediate GNVQ at Lewisham uses an induction assignment to provide early feedback to students, give them an idea of the demands of course work and check that they have been placed appropriately. The emphasis on the same GNVQ programme at East Surrey College is different. Here, the analysis of successful induction processes focuses more on the development of trustful relationships and of students' self-awareness and behavioural norms.

Accrington and Rossendale College, finally, revised its induction procedures to accommodate and support late starters. The three main elements of its support package are a rolling induction programme, a buddy system, late starter documentation and course material packs.

On-programme issues

On-programme strategies seem to fall into four main areas:

- assignments and assessments
- teaching
- tutoring
- team work.

Assignments and assessments

It may seem slightly odd to start with assignments and assessments but there is some suggestion in the case studies that these issues are particularly intractable on lower level programmes, not least because of the students' prior experience of school failure. Strategies developed by colleges can broadly be described in the following terms:

- scheduling
- greater clarity
- appropriateness
- reduction of workload
- formativeness.

Solihull Sixth Form College schedules GNVQ Intermediate assignments so that students undertake no more than two at the same time. Students also receive a booklet listing all their assignments at the beginning of the year to help them plan their workload.

Greater clarity has been achieved through clear and comprehensive task guidelines (High Pavement Sixth Form College), simpler and more explicit language (Askham Bryan College) and the introduction of a more user-friendly layout and an assignment template (Leeds College of Technology). Assignments have been reviewed to check the appropriateness of level (Leeds College of Technology).

Some colleges were successful in reducing student workload by mapping key skills against their curricula and integrating key skills tasks into vocational assignments (South East Essex College, Leeds College of Technology). Standards have also been set for formative and summative comments and for the time taken to produce these for students – 2 weeks in the case of South East Essex College.

Teaching

The two main messages emerging from accounts of successful teaching at Levels 1 and 2 relate to the notion of teaching as a shared process and to changes to schemes of work to promote more effective learning.

The shared nature of the teaching process is expressed in different ways that could perhaps be located on a spectrum. At one extreme, teachers retain control but monitor the student experience and gather feedback to make continual adjustments to their teaching (eg Leeds College of Technology, South East Essex College).

Students who felt that staff responded to their concerns were more likely to stay on the course, even if their learning seemed less than well organised.

(South East Essex College)

Some of the teaching on the new Entry level programme at Burton College was perhaps in the middle of the spectrum. Here, teachers developed projects that both engaged students' interest and, in their emphasis on practical and active learning, played to students' learning preferences:

The learning projects were geared to [students'] interest in popular culture. Teenage problems highlighted in the local newspaper gave a constant source of learning materials. Problem-solving challenges, like moving a marble across the room using only a piece of paper, gave interesting activities around which many issues could be developed.

(Burton College)

There is also evidence that teachers who did not adapt to the different learning needs of students were demonstrably less successful in securing improvements to student performance than colleagues who did (Askham Bryan College).

At the other end of the spectrum, the shared teaching process appears as a sort of evolving partnership between teachers and students along the lines identified in the Intermediate GNVQ Health and Social Care at East Surrey:

The learning process is dynamic and interactive, where change is the only constant state. Sometimes it is the relationship that changes and not the people in it. It's what's happening between them that counts and what stage this is at...

Learning initially is dependent on the teacher. As emotional maturity develops, the dependency is switched from the teacher to the subject, until the subject becomes the motivation for the learning. However, in emotionally immature learners, this process is not linear and the tutor needs to manage that development.

(East Surrey College)

Within this group of case studies, the Lewisham College study contains the most extensive discussion of a review and development of teaching. The team decided to focus on learner interactions with:

- course tutors
- course materials
- other students.

Improvements to the interactions with tutors focused on the qualities required of tutors and the development of their key skills expertise (particularly in Communication, Application of Number and Information Technology). A review of course materials identified problems in the organisation of key skills materials. These could be remedied relatively easily without substantial investment.

To develop positive peer group interactions, the programme team decided to promote collaborative learning both during induction and in the first semester (Lewisham College).

Schemes of work were changed in several case studies to facilitate learning through:

- a better balance of support and challenge (Lewisham College)
- better pacing and scheduling of units moving from relatively easy to relatively difficult (Bury College)
- the introduction of 6, 7 or 9 week teaching blocks (Bury College, Telford College of Arts and Technology, Uxbridge College)
- online course plans showing the links between schemes of work, learning activities and relevant materials available from the internet (South East Essex College).

Some learner motivation issues have already been explored. Most of the teaching and tutoring strategies make reference, at Levels 1 and 2, to the need to motivate and enthuse learners. This demands particular skills and resilience of teachers:

The teacher faces a group in which 70% would be classified as disruptive in a school situation. He or she needs an armoury of skills to manage behaviour professionally ... needs skills in defusing difficult situations rather than escalating them. Teachers and tutors have to be skilled at building upon a student's intrinsic motivation to turn around their life.

(Burton College)

Tutoring

The tutorial programme is a mix of personal and social education in groups and action planning in a one-to-one setting. The tutor is an anchor for the student, who knows that they matter as an individual to someone in a large college organisation. Daily contact allows discussion of problems as they arise. Successful personal tutor role models seem to [consist of] 'caring mother images' or 'street-wise older brothers'.

(Burton College)

The role of the personal tutor has been explored thoroughly in parallel research (Green 2001). There is broad agreement that for lower level programmes:

- the personal tutor role is very significant (Burton College, Huddersfield New College)
- personal tutor groups will normally be the same as subject groups (Lewisham College, Solihull Sixth Form College)
- the role is complex and demands substantial skills (East Surrey College).

The complexities of the personal tutor role are signalled in two case studies in particular. Huddersfield New College draws attention to the variety of roles played by the personal tutor and, hence, the range of records and documentation in the tutor file. These may include tutor reviews, subject reviews, attendance and achievement data, records of interviews, action plans and review documents, and records of any interviews or telephone calls to parents.

The case study from East Surrey College complements this with a different emphasis, on the dynamic and interactive nature of the tutorial relationship:

The group's expectations of the tutor can be complex. [Students] come with expectations that the role of the tutor is to nag them into working. Therefore, the tutor has to discard this role in favour of a more empowering role. The dynamics of the nagging role produce a withdrawal role from the student, and no learning occurs ... the tutor has to [adopt the role of a] supportive/caring person which should elicit a response that perhaps will explain more about the issues of why [a student] is not learning.

(East Surrey College)

Team work

One of the strongest messages to emerge from an analysis from the first round of ROA development projects is the importance of effective teaching teams (Martinez 2001). Improvement projects at Levels 1 and 2 come to very similar conclusions (Huddersfield New College, Tamworth and Lichfield College).

In the broader evaluation, effective teams tended to:

- have regular, formal meetings
- create opportunities for informal meetings as necessary
- develop and work to a structured plan
- be relatively small
- develop a shared understanding of problems and possible solutions (Martinez 2001 pp30–1).

Broadly, these conclusions are echoed in the Level 1 and 2 improvement projects (High Pavement and Solihull sixth form colleges). Similar conclusions are reached in the South East Essex College Intermediate level case study:

Course team management is of paramount importance and cannot be overstated. Courses with a high retention rate and consequently higher [success] rate, are those which have regular, well-attended meetings. Attendance and student issues should be standing items that can be actioned weekly.

(South East Essex College)



College issues

It is much easier to talk about college culture than it is to change it. There does seem to be a broad consensus, however, that managers can influence and sometimes change college ethos and culture. These issues are discussed in some detail in a readily available management textbook (Johnson and Scholes 1993), and in an unpublished LSDA report (Hull 2000).

At a very simplistic level, managers influence culture by what they pay attention to and the pattern of decisions they make. In the context of improving Level 1 and 2 programmes, the two key areas of managerial attention and decision making seem to be:

- curriculum
- staffing.

Curriculum

Curriculum in this context can be described as a series of decisions concerning programme purpose, content, structure and process; in other words a combination of:

- intended outcomes of programmes, including outcomes of assessment
- syllabus and subject content
- contact hours and timetabling
- teaching and learning processes.

Curriculum issues on lower level courses are important for two main reasons. Learners at this level have quite distinctive and special learning needs and characteristics. Also, some of the curriculum models offered in the past by colleges do not seem to work for these students.

Curriculum strategies developed at Levels 1 and 2 are discussed under the following headings:

- Foundation and entry curricula
- GCSE
- achievable goals
- timetabling
- key skills
- work experience.

Foundation and Entry curricula

Several colleges decided on a complete redesign of their Foundation curriculum. The rationale was that at Foundation level learners have more in common in relation to their basic and key skills needs than they have differences in the vocational content of their Foundation programmes.

Generic Foundation programmes are typically developed around a common core of basic and key skills, personal development and tutorial support, and include a variety of vocational options (Huddersfield New College, High Pavement Sixth Form College, Walsall College of Arts and Technology, Nelson and Colne and Uxbridge colleges).

Particularly full accounts of the creation of generic Foundation curricula can be found in the Walsall, Uxbridge, and Nelson and Colne colleges' case studies. Burton College developed a similar programme at Entry level built around Edexcel units.

Several colleges (Walsall CAT, Burton College) found that the generic programme could also be offered to students aged under 16, within partnership frameworks that had previously been developed with the local education authority and local schools.

GCSE

The generally poor levels of student retention and attainment in full-time GCSE resit programmes led to some colleges either abandoning such programmes altogether or discouraging student participation in them (Huntingdonshire Regional College, High Pavement Sixth Form College, Huddersfield New College).

Burton College retained its resit programme but refocused it around:

- three compulsory subjects (Maths, English and Science) with one extra option subject
- more selective recruitment.

Many students at Intermediate (and, for that matter, Advanced) level may need to retake individual GCSEs in English or Maths to obtain a Grade C for progression purposes. Poor success rates led two colleges to introduce a range of 'stepping stones', ie smaller units of accredited learning, which would help learners to achieve incrementally and so establish greater confidence in their own learning.

At Huddersfield New College, such stepping stones included college-written Open College Network units for English and the City and Guilds Numeracy Level 2 Qualification. Both are compatible with, and support progression towards, attainment in key skills *and* GCSE.

At West Kent College, a similar strategy for Maths GCSE is delivered through a study centre and supported by enhanced diagnostic testing, college certificates for unit achievement and a flexible approach which helps students to achieve their C Grade GCSE in up to 2 years.

Achievable goals

The utility of short-term, achievable goals has already been mentioned in relation to different improvement projects at Levels 1 and 2. These include:

- NVQ 1 as part of a school links programme (Stockport CFHE)
- Health and Safety Certificate as part of a student preparation summer school (Leeds College of Technology)
- incremental achievement associated with English and Maths GCSE resits (West Kent and Huddersfield New colleges).

The Hospitality and Catering programme at West Suffolk College introduced NVQ 1s as a first year of NVQ 2s and created a professional catering certificate as an umbrella for several different, short-term, small units of achievement.

Within its restructured Foundation level programme, Uxbridge College introduced a range of other qualifications such as the RSA achievement tests: 'These qualifications [are achievable] at stages throughout the year, with achievement being possible after each 6/7 week block of set of modules.'

Timetabling

Earlier research on strategies to improve achievement suggested that colleges were adapting quite different timetabling strategies. In some, courses were expanding to five days per week; in others, they were contracting to as few as two and a half days (Martinez 2000 pp 49–50).

At Levels 1 and 2, there seem to be two main approaches. Several colleges offer programmes over three or four days (Huntingdonshire Regional, West Suffolk and Lewisham colleges). The rationale is that learners dislike long gaps in their timetable and prefer a concentrated period at college, which also facilitates part-time work.

On the other hand, a number of colleges have developed a full week timetable over five days. This can involve quite substantial period of private study (Huddersfield New College, Solihull Sixth Form College). Alternatively, it can involve greater volumes of formal teaching and tutoring (Uxbridge and Burton colleges).

Key skills

The message concerning key skills is very similar to that concerning learning support: key skills need to be integrated within the vocational programmes (Huddersfield New College, Solihull and High Pavement sixth form colleges).

Generally this is achieved by vocational staff who work with key skills specialists to:

- map key skills and assessment opportunities within the vocational curriculum
- integrate key skills assessments within vocational assignments
- develop the skills of vocational staff
- join vocational and key skills specialists in team teaching.

Work experience

Several colleges (Solihull and High Pavement sixth form colleges, and Uxbridge College) emphasise the developmental and motivational benefits of work experience. At West Suffolk, students are encouraged to work in local industry for one day a week as part of the Hospitality and Catering NVQ programme. Colleges also note that careful preparation is required for both students and employers, and without such preparation both relationships with employers and learner confidence can be damaged (Solihull Sixth Form and Burton colleges).

Staffing

'We need teachers of people first, and subject second' (Burton College).

The analysis at the beginning of this report suggested that there could be teaching issues at Levels 1 and 2 connected with:

- the extent of teacher familiarity with both programmes and learners
- conceptions of teaching
- teaching skills.

This seems to be borne out in the approaches towards staffing issues.

Considerable emphasis is placed on staffing Foundation and Intermediate programmes with teachers who are knowledgeable about the diversity of learners on such programmes. Teachers should have elected to work on Level 1 and 2 programmes, work mainly or exclusively on lower level programmes and be sympathetic towards their students (Huddersfield New College, High Pavement Sixth Form College, Uxbridge and Burton colleges). An ability to relate to students at this level is at least as important as specific subject knowledge. These staffing issues are critical to the success of lower level programmes.

There can be no doubt that the best provision for students, evidenced by results and feedback from students, occurs in the teams staffed by volunteers who also have the appropriate student-centred approach, are prepared to be flexible and to support each other.

(High Pavement Sixth Form College)

This reinforces the intensity of teaching and support necessary for Foundation and Intermediate level students, and the need for skilful and expert teaching.

Many colleges meet these student requirements through double and even triple staffing. These staffing arrangements usually involve a basic skills/learning support/key skills teacher, working alongside a vocational teacher (Tamworth and Lichfield and High Pavement Sixth Form colleges, Leeds College of Technology, Walsall CAT, Burton and Uxbridge colleges).

At Uxbridge they have created learning coordinator posts to provide support to students.

There was an increased emphasis upon the tutorial system and while all students had a tutor with a teaching background, the focus of the support given by learning coordinators was essentially to provide another 'pair of hands'. The learning coordinator was expected to chase students when they were absent, telephone home whenever this was necessary and provide a quick response should there be a need to keep students 'on track'.

(Uxbridge College)

Double or triple staffing is of course expensive. Colleges seem to have resourced it either, like Burton College, by diverting extra teaching and tutoring resources to lower level programmes, or by identifying the additional learning support needs and the costs of such support and then obtaining extra support units from the funding agency.

Finally, in several colleges, time and resources were devoted to staff development, often for basic and key skills (Lewisham and West Suffolk colleges) or to develop tutoring skills (Lewisham College). At Walsall College of Arts and Technology, a relatively large group of tutors working on Entry and Foundation level courses were able to provide support for each other through a cross-college tutor support forum.



Conclusions

There is a growing body of evidence generated by strategies that have been successful in raising achievement on programmes at Foundation and Intermediate levels. Many of them are pertinent to improvement at any level but some seem to be particularly important at the lower levels.

Learner strategies

- At Levels 1 and 2, it is particularly important to develop and perhaps rebuild the motivation, self-esteem and confidence of learners.
- As well as specific teaching strategies, colleges have developed ways of celebrating and recognising student progress.
- Parents can be involved in supporting the achievement of their sons and daughters.
- Teachers need to intervene to help the diverse groups of learners develop a purposeful and supportive group ethos.
- Attendance monitoring and follow up are important, although poor attendance can be a signal of difficulties learners are experiencing with parts of their programme.
- Early warning systems are required to identify students who are most 'at risk' of dropping out from or failing to succeed in their course programme.
- Learners need specific help to develop their learning skills and styles. Some of the most effective interventions provided this help by changing teaching and assessment practices.

Teaching strategies

- Information and advice-giving processes can be developed to help prepare learners for their programmes and ensure effective transition, well before enrolment.
- Recruitment and selection are two-way processes: they need to be both rigorous and formative – helping learners make informed choices about their programme.
- Given the history of prior failure of many learners at Levels 1 and 2, particular attention needs to be given to ensure that assessment processes are not only well planned and designed, but concentrate on their formative aspect.
- Similarly, successful teaching strategies have involved both revisions to schemes of work and an emphasis on the affective dimension of learning.
- Team-work approaches involving vocational, key and basic skills specialists seem to be particularly important at Levels 1 and 2.

College strategies

- Several colleges found that they needed to re-design their Foundation and Entry offer around a more generic curriculum.
- Short, manageable and achievable learning goals are integral to the development of both motivation and learning skills.
- Where they do not already form the basis of the curriculum (for example in some Foundation programmes), key and basic skills need to be integrated as far as possible within the vocational curriculum.
- It seems to be essential for the success of programmes at Levels 1 and 2 to staff them with teachers who are responsive to the diverse needs of their students, as well as knowledgeable and enthusiastic about their subject.

To return to the issue raised at the beginning, diagnosis is needed in each college and indeed in each programme area seeking to raise achievement at Intermediate and Foundation level. The best way of using the experience of colleges reviewed here is to:

- first identify your own issues
- prioritise the issues likely to have the greatest impact on student achievement
- identify strategies which might best address those issues
- decide which (if any) strategies to adopt from elsewhere and how they might best be adapted to meet your own needs.

Appendix 1

Case study colleges

- 1 Accrington and Rossendale College
- 2 Askham Bryan College
- 3 Bishop Burton College
- 4 Burton College
- 5 Bury College
- 6 Capel Manor College
- 7 Croydon College
- 8 East Surrey College
- 9 High Pavement Sixth Form College
- 10 Huddersfield New College
- 11 Huntingdonshire Regional College
- 12 Leeds College of Technology
- 13 Lewisham College
- 14 Nelson and Colne College
- 15 Solihull Sixth Form College
- 16 South East Essex College
- 17 Stockport College of Further and Higher Education
- 18 Tamworth and Lichfield College
- 19 Telford College of Arts and Technology
- 20 Uxbridge College (not yet on the web)
- 21 Walsall College of Arts and Technology
- 22 West Herts College
- 23 West Kent College
- 24 West Suffolk College

Appendix 2

References and suggestions for further reading

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The Raising Quality and Achievement Programme is run by the Learning and Skills Development Agency in partnership with the Association of Colleges.

- We aim to reach all colleges and all levels of staff.
- We offer extra support to colleges that are receiving Standards Fund money to improve their practice.
- All our activity themes are backed by a programme of research and evaluation.
- The Raising Quality and Achievement Programme is sponsored by the DfES and all activities are subsidised.

Raising achievement at Levels 1 and 2

'Failure at school should not be compounded by failure at college' (Huddersfield New College).

The Learning and Skills Council and the inspectorates all emphasise the need to improve retention and achievement on programmes at Levels 1 and 2. This report draws on the work of over 20 colleges to present strategies that have been successfully developed and applied to improve student outcomes on lower level programmes.