

A dynamic nucleus

Colleges at the heart of local communities

The Final Report of the Independent Commission on Colleges in their Communities – Summary

Baroness Sharp of Guildford

November 2011

Introduction from the Chair of the Inquiry

This inquiry was set up in January 2011 with the purpose of investigating the role that further education colleges can and do play within their communities, and the added public value that they can bring to those communities in their role as leaders of learning. Our remit required that the inquiry was an independent one with its membership drawn from a wide range of stakeholders. In addition to the help and advice of colleagues on the commission, I am grateful to the many people who responded to the calls for evidence, sent in case studies and invited me to visit their colleges. I would like in particular to thank Mark Ravenhall from NIACE who has guided me through this inquiry and helped put this report together.

Further education colleges come from the twin traditions of working men's colleges and middle class philanthropy. Over the course of almost two centuries, individuals, employers, local communities and, more recently, central government have invested in, and benefited from, the delivery of this mix of liberal studies and family learning alongside vocational education and craft skills.

Today England's 347 colleges are in every town and city, offering courses ranging from agriculture to the arts, helping some millions of young people and adults to gain and enhance their skills and education, providing pathways to higher education and better jobs. They are key players in the educational infrastructure of this country and, perhaps more importantly, a vital part of the local employment and skills 'ecosystems'.

The communities they serve are diverse. They provide for young and old, public and private sector, employers and employees. The best colleges reach out to their communities and provide encouragement and leadership so that, in the words of the Prime Minister describing his Big Society vision, they are 'free and powerful enough to help themselves'. In this report we suggest that there is much potential, and considerable gain, for all colleges to do this.

Recent years have seen increasing government intervention in colleges. Almost twenty years of micro-management has led to a culture of following rather than taking the lead; of accepting, albeit grudgingly, instructions from above. The result is a funding and regulatory regime of immense complexity, which has consumed disproportionate top management time and resources. The aim of the coalition government is to free up the system and give colleges greater discretion and flexibility to decide on their own priorities. Equally, budget restraints also require them to do so within a climate of 'more for less'. Our aim is to give some useful pointers as to how this might be achieved.

The report summarises the Commission's conclusions from the ten months of research, analysis and discussion and suggests a way forward. It is crucial we get this right. We believe colleges can not only help people into jobs through skills training, but, by being proactive in their work with local communities, can also harness the energy of those communities towards positive outcomes which in turn promote health, happiness and social cohesion. In doing so, the key is for colleges to work in partnership, whether with local business, charities, local authorities or public sector organisations. While colleges may be the catalyst for change – hence our term 'the dynamic nucleus' – we see the way forward as essentially 'a shared agenda'.



Margaret Sharp, Baroness Sharp of Guildford

What we have found

Many colleges are already embedded in their communities

Further education colleges occupy a pivotal space in the learning and skills landscape. Their provision is exceptionally diverse, with informal and non-accredited learning sitting alongside vocational and academic study. Their primary role is the provision of learning and skills serving both their immediate communities and broader 'interest' communities throughout the UK and abroad. At the same time, many colleges have developed a significant wider role in their communities, contributing to widening access to learning, community cohesion and the development of civil society and enterprise.

But they still have to negotiate an unduly complex funding regime

Although there has been some simplification of the funding regime it still remains unduly prescriptive, with funding depending on such things as students' age, employment status and the level and aim of qualification sought. Confronted by cuts and other uncertainties on top of this already complex funding regime, some colleges opt to retreat to the low-risk areas of 16–19 provision and apprenticeships. (Even here, the funding regime discourages provision in communities where there is a risk of lower success rates.) Other colleges, however, have managed to negotiate their way through and have developed innovative programmes reaching out to marginalised, 'hard-to-reach' groups. These achievements have often been developed through creative partnerships with other players, both private and public sector.

And partnerships, while often rewarding, are expensive to negotiate

Negotiating partnership agreements, sometimes three- or four-way, takes a good deal of top management time, requires considerable resource input and carries further risks. Nevertheless, where successful they unlock new resources, spread risk and can bring new, innovative ideas into play.

The importance of local autonomy

Although international examples are of limited value in terms of direct transferability, one lesson from abroad is the importance of local decision making, where 'local' means close to the consumer and the needs of the locality. Systems which give considerable autonomy to the local unit have tended to be more successful, as have governance regimes which recognise local stakeholder involvement.

Employer, learner and wider community engagement

In terms of meeting the skills needs of the local area employer, engagement is vital. However, the most successful is engagement that goes beyond just treating employers as customers and involves them as co-designers of the skills training offer. Likewise, in terms of meeting the learner needs, the greater the involvement of learners in the design of the curriculum, the greater the buy-in, sense of ownership and achievement, the greater the success. In this context it is worth noting that many colleges play only a peripheral role in local planning regimes. In particular, with the demise of the Regional Development Agencies and the emergence of Local Enterprise Partnerships, the skills agenda is often sidelined, with universities rather than colleges being regarded as representing the education sector.

In investing in colleges, we get social returns too

Colleges do not just make an impact on the local economy and the labour force needs of local businesses. Reaching out to disadvantaged, hard-to-reach groups within their communities not only leads to a steady supply of learners for higher-level, qualification-based study, but supports colleges' wider role in promoting the well-being and cohesion of their communities. This, in turn, leads to significant benefits in other areas of public policy, including health, social care, support for families, volunteering and the Big Society. This wider impact does not always get the attention given to colleges' economic role – the Foster and Leitch reports, for example, concentrated almost exclusively on skills for business – yet it is an area in which colleges can make a real difference.

What we would like to see

Our vision is of colleges as a 'dynamic nucleus' at the heart of their communities, promoting a shared agenda of activities which both fulfil their central role of providing learning and skills training to young people and adults but which also reach out into their communities, catalysing a whole range of further activities. These activities in turn bring more (potentially many more) people into the learning experience (and therefore often also into the college) and in doing so ignite an interest in participating and setting the agenda, whether in terms of the college itself or more broadly of their local communities.

There is nothing new in this: the best of our further education colleges are in many respects already fulfilling this vision and the aspiration is that all colleges should live up to the practice of the best. If this happens we feel it will help colleges to have a clearer role and develop a distinct 'brand', as their counterparts have in other countries.

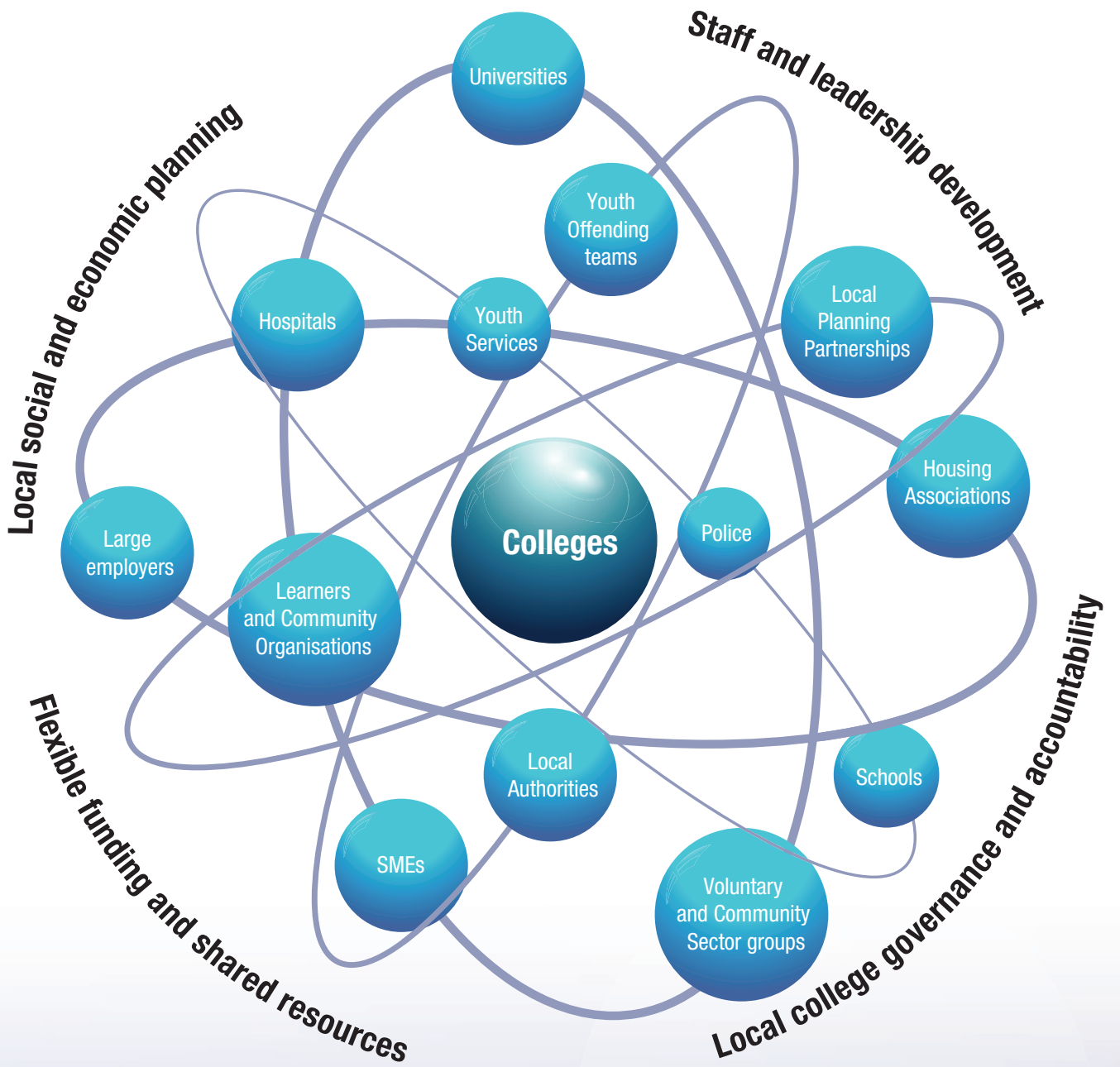
The key is the formation of partnerships which have the benefit both of spreading risks and of catalysing action. Through partnerships colleges can reach out to their communities and secure buy-in to the project. Partnerships are essentially about establishing relationships of mutual trust which encourage all players in the partnership to invest in the project, whether it is employers involved in a skills training initiative or a local/police authority in establishing a community hub in a deprived community.

We need to think about partnerships in new ways – not just 'more meetings'. Partnerships unlock social energy – people are often more willing to undertake activities, particularly where there are uncertainties, jointly rather than by themselves. An important principle is that colleges should build on existing informal partnerships, such as groups of younger adults using social media. For example, one college runs a community hub jointly with the local authority which channels the energy of its young people into a boxing club and a cycling club, both of which now raise substantial sums for charity from sponsored activities. In other words, social energy channelled to positive ends increases both economic and social productivity. Improved levels of education and skill mean higher economic productivity, but the knock-on effects of self-confidence and self-esteem mean higher social productivity in terms of a lower incidence of crime, better health, happiness and community cohesion.

The college is seen, therefore, as the central player in a network of partnerships, dynamic in the sense of developing and engaging with other partners. This enables the network itself to become part of the dynamic, with the college at its heart.

'Without [our local] college we would be very limited in what we could offer.'

Bridge Project, County Durham



How we think this can be achieved

A new generation of entrepreneurial college leaders

The most important factor required to turn this vision into reality is to support a new generation of college leaders who are both leaders and entrepreneurs. We recommend, therefore, that the sector should give serious consideration to the establishment of a dedicated college or sector leadership centre which combines first-class training with guidance and peer support in building partnerships and taking and handling risk.

Working with local employers to upgrade skills and create jobs

High on the agenda in present circumstances is the need to alleviate unemployment and create jobs. In this regard, colleges need to be working actively to develop partnerships with local employers, helping to fill skills gaps and working with them to tailor training to local needs.

Reaching out to smaller firms

Many colleges already work closely with large employers in their area, but more needs to be done by colleges to reach out to small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) using the new funding flexibilities. Here there are lessons to be learned from the Canadian model, where colleges work closely with SMEs not only to advise on skills requirements but also to provide a range of hands-on advice and help services.

Making joined-up government work at a local level

Partnership with public sector organisations is also essential. Joined-up government may prove difficult at the national level, but it can be highly effective when put into practice at a local level. There are many good examples: it is often a matter of where there is a will, there is a way. Colleges need to be proactive in seeking partnerships with local authorities, health providers, the police and youth offending teams, often in collaboration with charities and local community groups. Such partnerships have been shown to yield substantial benefits, transforming the lives of individuals and the well-being of whole communities.

Making the college voice heard on local planning partnerships

In this regard, colleges need to ensure that their voices are heard on local economic and social planning partnerships. Colleges are the main provider of skills training in many localities and they therefore need to be represented on Local Enterprise Partnerships, playing a prominent role in developing local skills strategies.

Developing a new curriculum

A new push into outreach activities requires new thinking about the curriculum. Providing routes and pathways to further learning is central, but it needs also to be a highly flexible curriculum, built to respond to local needs on an 'any time, any place' formula and, for young people in particular, making full use of the Internet and new social media. Building confidence and self-esteem is important and so, too, is recognition of the motivational stimulus that people gain from group-based activities, whether in the college, the workplace or the community. Hence the need to blend online, distance learning with campus-based or even residential sessions.

'Many of today's FE colleges descend in an unbroken line from mechanics' institutes and working men's colleges.'

Ursula Howard, Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning, Paper 7

A more flexible funding system

While the Coalition Government has introduced considerably more flexibilities than under the previous regime, funding is still constrained by too many rules and regulations as to what is to be spent on which activity. If all colleges are to be innovative and entrepreneurial they need more discretion to be able to allocate resources as they see fit. An extension of the earned autonomy system might be appropriate: for a start we suggest that those colleges judged 'Outstanding' or 'Good' should be able to allocate up to 25 per cent of their adult skills budgets to address local priorities, subject, of course, to the normal audit procedures. To give slightly greater certainty for forward planning, we also suggest that colleges, like universities, should be subject to three-year rolling budgets.

A new approach to governance and accountability

Developing the community agenda for colleges requires new thinking about governance and accountability. Governing bodies of colleges sometimes find tension between their engagement with communities and their statutory responsibilities in relation to quality and financial performance. The new Foundation Code of Governance for colleges, due to come into force next year, already sets out a new norm for community engagement. This might be developed to include guidance on ways in which the college might engage with and account to their various communities on their performances to include good practice guidelines, benchmarks and performance indicators. One possibility is to extend this section of the Code into a fully fledged 'compact' negotiated with the local community and explicitly setting out with greater transparency the college's community offer and expected outcomes against which progress might be measured.

'The more locally relevant provision is, the more empowered and resourced local populations are and hopefully more supportive of their citizens.'

Preston Learning Disabilities Forum

A shared agenda

In our interim report we referred to what we saw as a 'shared vision' for a renewed and revitalised further education system with colleges at its heart. We felt that if government 'released the shackles' of an over-rigorous funding regime and other 'red tape' then colleges would deliver more in terms of community leadership; co-investment by individuals and employers; more accessible information to the public; and greater local accountability.

Since then we have received a great deal of support for a shared agenda of reform, with colleges, their support bodies, and local and central government stepping up to the plate. The precise details of how this will be taken forward will be a collaboration between these agencies – we are delighted that work has already started in this regard.

Colleges to:

- Commence publication of college funding strategies that outline the levels of co-investment by state, employer, individual and other partners **(by September 2013)**.
- Define a clear offer from colleges to the communities they serve as specified within the proposed community compact **(by September 2012)**.
- Establish within colleges a clearly defined community curriculum that responds to local needs and associated educational outreach work **(by March 2013)**.
- Review HR strategies to reflect their community plans and introduce effective organisational support and development interventions and opportunities for all staff, leaders and governors **(by July 2012)**.
- Explore ways of helping local SMEs with apprenticeships and consultancy support **(by March 2013)**.

Local partnerships and commissioning bodies to:

- Ensure colleges are properly represented as joint partners in local employment and skills planning processes, building on the effective partnerships colleges have already established with bodies such as the Local Government Association and the British Chambers of Commerce **(by September 2012)**.
- Share existing public sector intelligence and data systems to increase common understanding of community needs **(by March 2012)**.
- Make sure that colleges are properly linked into the new commissioning bodies being established within the NHS **(by March 2013)**.

'There should be an enhanced role for teaching and learning practitioners
in strategic position of the college.'

Institute for Learning (IfL)

Central government agencies to:

- Establish an 'innovation code' to allow flexibility to fund responsive provision which meets locally assessed priority needs. This should total up to 25 per cent of the college's annual adult skills budget **(by September 2012)**, rising to 50 per cent **(by September 2014)**.
- Establish a model and funding methodologies for three-year funding **(by September 2013)**.
- Review the Qualifications and Credit Framework to enable the development of flexible and responsive community qualifications **(during 2011/12)**.
- Define the self-regulation framework envisaged for colleges **(by summer 2012)**.
- Harmonise Ofsted inspection criteria on meeting community needs with those set out in the Foundation Code of Governance **(by April 2012)**.

Sector support bodies to:

- Develop a community curriculum template with tools to help institutions to develop an overall curriculum strategy and linked assessment system **(by September 2012)**.
- Establish a professional programme to develop a new responsive community curriculum via the Learning and Skills Improvement Service and the Institute for Learning **(by September 2012)**.
- Develop, through sector collaboration, good practice guidance and performance measures for community engagement **(by July 2012)**.
- Develop, with the AoC Governors' Council, an annex to the Foundation Code of Governance that sets out norms for community engagement, including supporting good practice guidance, benchmarks and performance indicators **(by July 2012)**.
- Identify funding to develop innovative and collaborative leadership programmes focused on the skills needed to address local issues and to create solutions **(by September 2012)**.
- Establish partnerships and programmes between the Institute for Learning and other professional networks to ensure synergy and effective professional development between staff and leaders **(by September 2012)**.
- Consider the formation of a dedicated college or sector leadership centre to ensure a strong focus on leadership and management for colleges **(by September 2012)**.

'Colleges with their close relationship with people in the community are ideally placed to show leadership through building the knowledge and skills of people living nearby.'

Forum for the Future

Independent Commission on Colleges in their Communities

Commissioners

Margaret Sharp, Baroness Sharp of Guildford – Chair of the Inquiry
Mike Atkinson – Governor, Plumpton College
Denise Brown-Sackey – Principal, Newham College (from May 2011)
Michelle Dawson – Community Manager, Hammerson PLC
Sally Dicketts – Principal, Oxford and Cherwell Valley College
Beverley Evans – Chair, Local Education Authorities Forum for the Education of Adults (LEAFEA)
Maggie Galliers CBE – Principal, Leicester College
Satnam Gill OBE – Principal, Working Men's College, Camden
Geoff Hall – Principal, New College Nottingham (until May 2011)
Stella Mbubaegbu CBE – Principal and Chief Executive, Highbury College
Elaine McMahon CBE – Chief Executive and Principal, Hull College
David McNulty – Chief Executive, Surrey County Council
Chris Morecroft – President, Association of Colleges (AoC)
Lynne Sedgmore CBE – Executive Director, 157 Group
John Widdowson CBE – Principal and Chief Executive, New College Durham
Tom Wilson – Director, unionlearn

Observers

Verity Bullough – Executive Director, Capacity and Infrastructure, Skills Funding Agency (from June 2011)
Lorna Fitzjohn – Divisional Manager, Learning and Skills, Ofsted
David Hughes – National Director of College and Learning Provider Services, Skills Funding Agency (until May 2011)
Bobbie McClelland – Deputy Director for Post-19 Landscape, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)
Alison Morris – Senior Manager, UK Commission for Employment and Skills
Alan Tuckett OBE – Chief Executive, NIACE
Rob Wye – Chief Executive, Learning and Skills Improvement Service

Project Team

Mark Ravenhall – Director of Policy and Impact, NIACE
Dr Fiona Aldridge – Research Manager, NIACE (until June 2011)
Lindsey Bowes – Senior Research Manager, CFE
Amy Goodall – Project Administrator, NIACE
Joy Mercer – Director of Policy (Education), AoC
Sarah Neat – Senior Research Executive, CFE
Dr Helen Plant – Research Manager, NIACE (from June 2011)
Ian Yarroll – Programme Manager, NIACE

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 Mike Davis, Ofsted
 Abigail Diamond, CFE
 John Everard, Northern College
 Marina Gaze, Ofsted
 Keith Gilson, Houlton
 David Golding, Stockport College
 Denise Hayhurst, Blackburn College
 Paul Head, The College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London
 Anthony Hemmings, Burton and South Derbyshire College
 John Holmes, Urban Matters
 Karen Ingram, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
 Kathryn James, LSIS
 Leon Jenkins, NUK College
 Suzanna Johnson, Mary Ward Centre
 Beverley Jones, North Hertfordshire College
 Robin Jones, Waltham Forest College
 Tracey Kinsley, Leicester College
 Gemma Knott, 157 Group
 Abi Lammas, LSIS
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 Holly Manley, Apprentice of the Year 2010
 Chris Minter, Leicester Council
 Judith Mobbs, Suffolk County Council
 Frank Offer, Surrey County Council
 Alice Pethic, Warwickshire College
 David Pine, Sussex Coast College
 Lee Probert, Hull College Group
 Hilary Rimmer, Birmingham Metropolitan College
 Steven Roberts, Cornwall College
 Mark Robertson, South Staffordshire College
 Irina Stanera, Working Men's College
 Steve Stanley, Ofsted
 David Steadman, Falmouth Marine School
 Richard Stevens, Hull City Council
 Helen Stevenson, Derby College
 Selina Stewart, Joseph Chamberlain College
 Dan Taubman, UCU
 Cathy Taylor, Sirius Academy
 Ann Walker, WEA
 Gary Warke, Hull College

Andy Wilson, Westminster Kingsway College
 Tony Woodward, Strode's College

Staff, students and stakeholders at the following colleges visited by the chair:

Barnsley College
 Bolton Community College
 Bradford College
 City Literary Institute, Holborn
 Hull College
 Leicester College
 Newham College of Further Education
 North Warwickshire and Hinckley College
 Northern College
 South Thames College
 Working Men's College, Camden

Further submissions of evidence

Denis Allison, Trustee of Horden Youth and Community Centre
 Ruth Auton
 Tony Bartley, Sandbach School
 Basingbourn Village College
 David Bell, Asset Skills
 Shane Chowen, Institute for Learning
 Teresa Cole, Head of Community College, Highbury College
 Professor David Collinson, Lancaster University
 June Davison, Northumbria University
 Derby City Council Adult Learning Service
 Devon Community Learning Partnership
 Colin Farmery, St Vincent College
 Sandie Foster, Royal National College for the Blind
 Julie Hinchliffe, Bradford College
 Jeremy Holloway
 Azara Issifu, BIMATA Associates
 Professor David James, Bristol Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning and Education
 Gemma Knott, 157 Group
 The Lancashire Colleges
 Lancaster and Morecambe College
 Macclesfield College
 Iain McKinnon
 Andrew Morris
 David Nelson
 Tra My Nguyen
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