



Working in Partnership for Quality Improvement

Partnership working by independent specialist colleges and
the extent to which it supports and enables quality
improvement: a Natspec report

John Gush

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Working in Partnership for Quality Improvement

A report of a Natspec project, funded by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), to review the nature and extent of partnership work in the Independent Specialist College (ISC) sector.

1. Introduction and background

Providing high quality further education (FE) for people with complex learning difficulties and disabilities is dependent on excellent communication and collaboration between the individuals and agencies involved. The learners in ISCs are vulnerable young people and adults who receive services from many different individuals and organisations; they rely on the colleges to establish coherent structures and procedures that support their best interests. The transfer of responsibility for funding FE to local authorities (LAs) via the Young Peoples Learning Agency (YPLA) offers added impetus and opportunities for ISCs to get involved in the local structures of partnership boards and joint commissioning. Ofsted's Common inspection framework for further education and skills 2009 (CIF) has set a high priority on effective partnership working across the strands and aspects.

This project surveyed all ISCs then in receipt of Learning and Skills Council funding and concluded that a great number of partnerships exist at a variety of levels and that these partnerships:

- ~ enhance the range of opportunities and the quality of delivery for learners,
- ~ support the drive for continued quality improvement, and
- ~ facilitate links and collaboration with other organisations and agencies.

However, there remain obstacles to overcome, in particular around the planning, operating and quality assurance of partnerships.

When Sue Preece, HMI, spoke to the project conference in February 2010, she presented a telling snapshot of the inspection results for ISCs inspected to that date in the current round. She pointed out that the reports of those ISCs graded good and outstanding contained many references to effective partnership working and collaborations, whereas there were few or no references to partnership working in the reports of those colleges graded satisfactory.

A series of recommendations have arisen from the project, some of which relate to the importance of sustaining and enhancing existing partnership practice. Other recommendations refer to areas where the project has revealed the need for improvements. These include:

- ~ developing and sustaining robust partnership agreements;
- ~ establishing effective planning and quality assurance arrangements;
- ~ taking advantage of all opportunities to share the specialist expertise of ISCs with their partners and
- ~ continuing to build relationships with local authorities.

2. The survey

The project gathered information through an email questionnaire and follow up phone calls. Additional input was sought from the delegates to the project conference.

The draft questionnaire was shared with six senior ISC colleagues with wide ranging knowledge and experience of the sector and their responses were taken into account in the final design. The structure of the questionnaire assumed three broad categories of partnership working arrangements. These were:

- “ arrangements with a partner provider(s) for curriculum delivery - usually a local general further education (GFE) college
- “ arrangements with some other organisation for curriculum delivery - this could be one of a wide range, the most common of which is work experience with a local employer
- “ arrangements for professional partnerships and collaborations aimed at supporting staff members and college leaders with various aspects of their roles.

51 of the 56 colleges who were invited to respond did so, a high response rate of 92%. Additional information was sought by follow up phone calls and information gathered during some of these conversations is included in the form of case studies later in this report.

3. Findings about partnerships with other providers for curriculum delivery

3 i How many ISCs work with partner providers?

A wide range of partnerships was reported, falling into three types which are reflected in the table below. The table presents an approximation of the numbers involved and, in order to make them easier to read, situations where colleges use more than one of these categories for their delivery have been conflated so that each college only appears once.

Those partnerships where most or a significant proportion of the curriculum is delivered by the partner provider	
number of ISCs	4
% of ISCs	8% of respondents
% of students involved	from 50% to 90%
partnerships per ISC	between 1 and 4
partnership agreement?	yes = 4
Those partnerships where partners deliver regular curriculum content for some students	
number of ISCs	23
% of ISCs	45% of respondents
% of students involved	from 10% to 90%

partnerships per ISC	between 1 and 4
partnership agreement?	yes = 16 yes, but with reservations = 4 no = 5
Those where partnership delivery is used to enrich the students' learning experience by offering programmes not otherwise available	
number of ISCs	20
% of ISCs	30% of respondents
% of students involved	between 15% and 60% with one ISC reporting %most+
partnerships per ISC	between 1 and 8

It is clear from the numbers reported above that most ISCs are using partner providers to deliver some of their curriculum offer. 4 of the respondents reported that these arrangements had been in place in the region of 20 years, whereas the majority of the others spoke about a more recent move to set up these partnerships, generally in the past two to five years.

3 ii Do partnerships lead to enhanced outcomes for learners?

All respondents reported significant benefits for students through:

- an increased range of options available,
- opportunities for ISC learners to experience main stream settings and
- as preparation for transition when they complete their programme at the ISC.

On the broader range of options that partnership delivery made available to their students, one respondent made this enthusiastic comment, *'Immense benefits - no other way to work. Real life opportunities to learn new social skills'*, while another reflected that *'we are able to offer a very wide range of courses unachievable without partnership with GFE's; these lead to academic qualifications designed to support transition from ISC to HE or employment'*.

One smaller college commented on the *'huge range of courses available for the learners'*, and another listed the benefits experienced by learners: *'extension of curriculum offer for learners, learner experience, learner independence, learner social development, enhanced learner aspirations, social inclusion'*.

Using partner provision to broaden students' experience and to support transition to opportunities after college was mentioned a number of times by respondents. One said *'For some this is their first experience of the mainstream and we have outstanding retention levels both in-house and at [GFE]'* and another explained that *'in some instances the 'partnership course' is used as a means of induction to mainstream. This means that when students move to mainstream they are more likely to be ready to engage. In my experience students who engage in a 'partnership course' often go on to take a higher level course post [ISC].'*

There was a mixed response to the question about whether students taking part in partnership delivery achieved better than those who were not. The majority felt that there

was no evidence on which to base a response, because courses at ISCs are tailored to individual needs, with the students' achievements being personal to their individual capacity rather than the structural arrangements. One said: *students don't achieve better on partnership courses than at our college. But good that they get the opportunity for broader experience than they would have otherwise*'.

3 iii Relations with providing partners

A consistent refrain that emerged from the responses about management arrangements was the importance of communication. The difference in size between a large GFE department and a small ISC was mentioned by some respondents, with one commenting that *Partners are often large organisations with individual departments operating autonomously on a daily basis. This can lead to a lack of information sharing*' while another explained *Difficulties to date are maintaining regular contact and communication protocols across very busy environments*'.

However, the difficulty most regularly mentioned was the unreliable availability of GFE courses. One commented *we don't get to know what the students can do at the local college until September* and another said *The local colleges do not finalise the programmes which will definitely run until late summer, classes will close if insufficient numbers, contingency plans are always needed*. The irritation of another is clear from the following comment, *the local college withdrew all A-levels in sciences at short notice. STRONG element of risk!*

A lack of the specialist skills sometimes taken for granted in ISCs was highlighted by some respondents. One reflected on the lack of specialist expertise and mentioned the example of first aid for people with epilepsy. Another noted that ISCs have a particular ethos and set of values best suited to meeting the needs of vulnerable learners, which cannot be readily duplicated in large GFEs.

All ISCs working with partner providers reported that they ensured that appropriate learning support was in place. In most instances this involved ISC staff accompanying the learner. The importance of the planning, training, supervising and monitoring of learning support assistants was raised by respondents with one commenting that the requirement for learning support is significantly higher for learners at partner providers than it is at the ISC. (A set of reports about learning support arising from the Enhancement of Learning Support project can be found at www.natspec.org)

3 iv Quality assurance issues

Some ISCs reported that they had developed effective systems for observing and evaluating the quality of provision made for their learners by partner providers. These arrangements must be based on a shared understanding of what constitutes good teaching and learning. These comments are indicative of this. *Paired observations between the ISC senior managers and partners' management take place using an agreed protocol. The ISC makes its own judgements of its own Learning Support staff and the use of learning Support by the lecturer.* We use *termly drop in visits, joint formal observations and feedback from [ISC] Staff*'.

However, the majority of respondents experienced a degree of frustration because the systems in the two organisations were not compatible. Some ISCs felt that their partner

providers were not sufficiently aware of their need to monitor, evaluate and quality assure the provision for their students. One noted that it is not easy to do observations of teaching and learning (OTL) in partner colleges; this meant that if things were not as they should be, their only option was to withdraw the students. Another commented that this had been a bone of contention for many years. In particular, it was difficult to get achievement data, as this is only conveyed to the learner under data protection, so although the ISC pays the fees, they get no information to contribute to their SAR until much later.

3 v Partnership agreements

The majority of these delivery partnerships were set up at the instigation of the ISC. More than half have partnership agreements but there is a considerable variation in the level of rigour of these arrangements. They ranged from a well established agreement in place, regularly reviewed and not dependent on the individuals who set it up, through to informal arrangements that can be altered at will. The benefits of having an agreement in place are well researched and include the following:

- The context from which the partnership has developed is clear, there is shared understanding and everyone involved knows why they have come together.
- The partners know and understand each other's interests and agendas and there is mutual respect and trust based on open communication.
- The purpose and values of the partnership are clear and shared.
- The level of each partner's participation is clear and managers are clear about what they - and their partners - are expected to achieve. Participation is reciprocal.
- The structures and processes for working in partnership are clear and effective and are defined at all levels, from overall governance to daily operations.
- Accountability is clearly defined, with effective processes for accounting to all stakeholders.

One respondent exemplified the difficulties associated with not having an effective agreement in place. She spoke about a local GFE that had withdrawn a course on which she had expected to enrol a number of third year students and which was already mentioned in their publicity material as well as in their individual learner schedules.

4. Findings related to other partnerships that support curriculum delivery

There was a wide range of responses to the questions in this section. All the colleges referred to work experience, while many outlined the different types of community involvement in which their students took part.

4 i Work Experience

With a national focus on employment for people with learning difficulties through the Valuing Employment Now strategy, it is encouraging that 100% of the responding colleges are providing work experience. Activities are wide ranging. In some colleges students take part in the business of running the college in ways as diverse as working on reception, as visitor hosts and as car park attendants. Many colleges have retail and

catering facilities in which the students gain work experience at a variety of levels, while some have set up social enterprise activities specifically to provide work experience. All these bring students into contact with members of the public.

Colleges also engage with local businesses, charitable and voluntary organisations and local authorities to identify appropriate opportunities for their students to develop employability skills through first hand experience. Examples include national chain stores such as Boots and Morrison's, major local employers like Newcastle United and a plethora of local shops, care homes, garden centres and garages. One college reported more than 100 businesses on their database. Many of these employers visit colleges and support students to develop interview skills.

The benefits to students were consistently mentioned as being massive, huge or outstanding, with one respondent referring to the *'hidden enrichment'* that takes place alongside the specific skills acquired through an expanded range of opportunities. There were many comments about the importance of students taking part in *'real world'* activities and *'real work'* with specialist support from the college.

One college commented on the value for students of *'transferring their skills to a new environment whilst the host employer gets a real benefit now while for another: 'There is a great benefit to the students and the college through these placements. We know this through individual students developing social and communication skills. Also learning about the work environment and making informed choices enables our students to build volunteer work into lifestyle plans after leaving college. Some leavers are now undertaking volunteer jobs in their local community doing a similar role as they had undertaken whilst at college.'*

One respondent sums up many of the responses and makes clear that there are advantages to the businesses offering the work experience placement as well as to the students taking part.

'Benefits for us: Inclusion, learner experience, learner skill development, confidence of learner, self esteem and community engagement. Benefit for employer: inclusivity, support for disability, knowledge of disability, knowledge of our organisation, community commitment'.

Another explains that even though there can be difficulties with placements, they have a beneficial effect:

'The partnerships provide 'life outside of the Centre' opportunities for our students which are hugely valuable as they will be living and working outside of the college and the reality of that is essential if they are to continue to make progress when they leave us. The difficulties can be that students are not always able to make the most of these opportunities and may not always be able to meet the demands and expectations. However this in itself can be a learning curve and can provide a more realistic foothold of where a student is at, and what they may need to work on to make positive progress'.

Colleges reported the requirement for dedicated staff members or teams to carry out supporting activities including:

- identifying potential opportunities,

- talking through possibilities with senior personnel,
- carrying out risk assessments and ensuring the necessary insurance is in place
- introducing and supporting the students and
- monitoring and evaluating their experience.

One commented *‘All work placements are evaluated. We have good job outcomes and these placements are influential in ensuring learners have the skills, abilities and attributes to make credible applicants’*, while for another *‘The recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit has shown that partnership working, for us, has had a positive outcome’*.

Some colleges were aware of procedural requirements they had still to develop. In response to a question asking whether these work experience partnerships had improved the quality of the college provision, one respondent commented that the College is aware of the need to have greater quality control of provision and develop a more rigorous induction and development programme.

Some colleges reported on the procedures they undertook to ensure that their students were appropriately safeguarded during work experience, although for another complying with new Independent Safeguarding Authority requirements presented a difficulty. One college gave a detailed account of the process they were using.

‘Work based learning co-ordinator visits potential employers, visits again and undertakes risk assessment, provides employer guidelines and agreement terms for placement. Learner attends interview and dates of placement agreed, learner allocated support from college, learner attends with diary, report and feedback from employer, student support worker and learner - Employer guidelines, placement terms and responsibilities, insurance, health and safety agreement, risk assessments, reports feedback’.

Another explained that they have engaged an independent agency to identify and vet the businesses to which they send students on placement.

There was no specific question referring to safeguarding and vetting procedures, so the fact that a number of respondents mentioned this area indicates that colleges are giving this issue a high level of consideration. However, the widespread use of local businesses premises for placement of vulnerable students needs to be treated with great caution and the high quality risk assessment and avoidance practices cited above need to be seen as a standard for all ISCs.

4 ii Community Involvement

There is a huge range of community involvement and respondents were clear about the benefits for individual students. Colleges are making it possible for their students to take part in activities that include sports clubs, boating clubs, drama and film companies, gyms and health clubs, Riding for the Disabled, youth clubs, attending churches, mosques, synagogues and other religious associations and organisations, and local radio stations. Students take part as participants but also as helpers and volunteers.

These activities are variously considered as formal learning or as leisure, with the distinction blurred in a number of colleges. For many colleges there were no difficulties reported in enabling community involvement although one respondent may have been speaking for others when he reflected on the work load. *‘[ISC] develops the links and*

encourages the students to go out and use them ... but to maintain it, it has to be worked!!!'

5. Findings related to staff development partnerships

5 i Training opportunities

An important aspect of partnership work relates to training and development opportunities offered by ISCs to their partners. Just under half of the respondents (20 out of 51) indicated that they are offering staff training for their partner providers in their area of specialism, with five other colleges engaged in joint training ventures. In addition ISCs also support other training providers by offering placements for their students. The extent and regularity of staff training opportunities offered to the staff members of partner providers varies considerably between colleges, as the following examples show.

One ISC has developed and is delivering a suite of accredited training materials for learning support practitioners in collaboration with partners, including a GFE college, for which they were granted substantial funds. Another college reported that they delivered bespoke training to GFE staff about augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) equipment that new staff were dual-trained at the GFE and the ISC and that work-shadowing took place in different colleges. They also offered speech and language training to GFE colleges on INSET days. With regard to specialisation in sensory impairment, one college offers specific training in British Sign Language as well as a more general course in deaf awareness, and other colleges offer visual impairment awareness. A smaller college reported that Makaton and Autism training is offered by them to all partner providers; this partnership was set up initially to train staff and there is a 92% achievement rate at present. One ISC principal delivers Autism awareness to their partner college and calculated that this reached between 800 and 1000 people. The following comment sums up the range of training activity in which some colleges take are engaged.

‘A range of GFE staff attend our Professional Resource Centre training events and some of our staff are engaged in mentoring GFE staff. Broad range of training identified and implemented including OLT training, specific teaching approaches etc. We also run an annual joint conference with them to review potential for increased joint working’.

5 ii Placements for students

In addition to offering staff training opportunities, some colleges are offering support and facilities for workforce training. One ISC has relationships with a range of training providers for whom they offer student placements in health and social care, nursing and speech and language therapy. Students from the local PCT also undertook placements at the college. Another college accepted social science students studying at a local university for social work places, while a third college, in addition to a partnership with the local university works with its local police force and offers placements for trainee officers. It is worth noting however that one college commented that opportunities for placements were offered but rarely taken up. There are also administrative and supervisory responsibilities associated with these placements.

5 iii Working with the CETTS

The final section of responses about staff training related to four colleges that have established partnerships with centres for excellence in teacher training (CETTs). A wide range of innovative involvement was reported, with one college whose vice principal serves on the board of their local CETT reporting that the arrangement was proactive, highly professional and enormously useful and that the college gained *'new qualifications, IfL developments, CPD events, advice and guidance.'* Another college has received funding via their CETT to develop a manual on challenging behaviour.

6. Findings related to professional partnerships aimed at quality improvement

6 i Formal groups

Every ISC takes part in some form of partnership activity aimed at enhancing the quality of their provision and delivery. The responses indicate how highly these relationships are valued, especially by the smaller colleges, who appreciate the opportunities that have recently been made available to extend their access to professional communities of practice. Here are some examples

- *Partnerships enable us as a college to improve our practice and share knowledge.*
- *Partnerships with other ISC's have proved to be extremely beneficial - to date with all colleges there have been clear, open lines of communication and a strong desire to work together to share good practice.*
- *The most important element of these arrangements is the networking and sharing best practice around operational techniques. Improvements feed into the continued quality improvement of the College.*
- *Benefits: less isolation, networking, sharing of good practice, current information*
- *Helps to see the wood for the trees.*
- *Time hungry for small organisations - but the benefits are generally worth the effort*

Most ISCs that completed the survey were involved with peer review and development (PRD) groups established under the LSIS Support for Excellence programme. There are currently 8 ISC only groups, based on regional proximity and one national ISC group drawn from the larger good and outstanding colleges. In addition many ISCs also take part in PRD groups with local partners. Respondents were keen to flag up the value of participation in PRD groups. One commented on the rigour of the process while another described it as *highly beneficial - other ISCs have understanding of the issues and there is some match of learner profile'.*

Respondents also commented on how highly they valued the series of focus groups and forums organised by Natspec in partnership with a range of sector organisations and agencies. Participants reflected positively on having the opportunity to engage directly with, for example, Lifelong Learning UK, the IfL and the LSC/YPLA over issues such as

the development of the Framework for Excellence, the new Foundation Learning arrangements, the Individual Learner Record and the Staff Individual Record. They also reflected on the value of the Natspec regional meetings for ISC leaders.

In addition a number of ISCs stated that they take part in local FE providers groups and local principals forums.

6 ii The Natspec / LSIS Collaborative Improvement Project

The Natspec / LSIS Collaborative Improvement Project was taking place at the time of the survey. This included a series of two party partnerships between ISCs, where colleagues worked on the quality improvement planning process with the aid of brokered support from third party ISCs that had been graded good or outstanding in their previous inspection. A report detailing the outcomes of the project is available on the Natspec website. The following comments from participants give a flavour of the response of ISC leaders to the initiative.

It really works well and I believe it is one of the most effective strategies to ensure quality improvement across the sector.

ISCs work well together. They are keen to improve and develop practice. There is an openness to embrace new ideas and developments and a genuine willingness to share and develop best practice. Trust, professionalism, diplomacy and sensitivity are all skills that are required when taking part in any collaborative work and these were evident in this partnership.

7. Partnerships with local authorities

Establishing partnership arrangements with Local Authorities was a key theme for many respondents. In view of the changes to the planning and funding of further education, most ISCs understood how important it was to build effective relationships with a range of local stakeholders. Some felt that they had this issue in hand and were well integrated into local patterns of provision; others reported that their efforts had been frustrated and that they had not been able to engage with the relevant local agencies or organisations. Where difficulties remained, they tended to be in relation to not being included in key meetings and boards, the difficulty of identifying the correct contacts and the fact that this is not yet a priority area of work for many LAs.

26 out of the 51 ISC respondents reported active partnerships with LAs			
involved in 14 - 19 partnerships	involved in Learning Disability Partnership Boards	involved in PCT and health authority networks	involved in other LA partnerships
12 ISCs	6 ISCs	3 ISCs	8 ISCs

8. Conclusions: What can partners learn from this research?

8 i The value of partnerships

The message about the vital importance of partnerships and collaborative working shines out from the responses to the questionnaire, the more so because of the vulnerability of the learners in the ISCs. Effective partnership working cuts through the barriers that colleges and institutions necessarily set up, enabling a learning experience that has a far higher chance of being coherent and consistent. Partnerships beyond college bring the learner into a learning relationship with their local community and the employment opportunities available, and partnerships with training providers and other institutions enable a rich sharing of the expertise that is being developed.

These messages were reinforced at the partnership conference that took place at the Royal National College for the Blind in Hereford in February 2010, and at the focus group meeting at the LSIS offices in Coventry in June 2010. Contributors reviewed the project findings as well as sharing their own experiences. They distilled two sets of messages.

8 ii Communication

The first was the requirement for commitment to focussed and structured communication. Partnership agreements do not solve all the problems that can arise, but they minimise opportunities for things to go wrong. Formalising arrangements between providers or other partners with a partnership agreement is seen as key to the success of a partnership and will make its long term effectiveness more likely. It will anticipate the issues that might arise and outline the structures that the partners will put in place to ensure continuity. Areas the agreement should cover will include protocols for communication and meetings, who does what, who needs to tell what to whom, how problems can be speedily identified and resolved. This is particularly important when the decision making responsibility would normally rest squarely with one of the partners but where there are significant implications for the other partner. Changes in courses offered and in quality assurance arrangements were clear examples identified in the questionnaire responses.

8 iii Making it work

The second message was that in order to take advantage of the opportunities offered by a partnership backed up with an effective partnership agreement two further qualities were needed. One was a combination of professional openness and willingness to share combined with a clear view that this approach will achieve the best possible opportunities for the learners concerned. The other is persistence and determination. Each partnership project includes all the activities involved in business management: establishing the vision, making and carrying out the operational plan and reviewing the activity with a view to continuing, adjusting or terminating the project.

The successful partnerships identified within the questionnaire response and from the other contributors were those carried out with consistent and business like thoroughness and where the needs and interests of the learners were seen as paramount.

9. Case studies

The following case studies are intended to provide a snap shot of some of the partnerships that ISCs are engaged in. The intention is to provide a flavour of the partnerships, rather than a detailed account, and also to follow up some of the stories that were told in 2006 in the QIA funded report *Supporting quality improvement in ISCs through co-location and partnerships*

Plans for co-location: Bridge College is working towards co-location with the Manchester College

Bridge College is seeking a co-location arrangement with The Manchester College. The plan is for Bridge College to co-locate to a new site together with other organisations that provide services for people with disabilities and with Manchester College. Additional possibilities being discussed include the development of supported housing on the site and the involvement of Manchester University. The resources will include facilities for the local community as part of the re-generated *New East Manchester* and the plan, which is supported by Greater Manchester Council, is for the development to be located on currently derelict land being made available by Rolls-Royce.

Key messages from this partnership:

- “ This kind of partnership requires committed and influential leaders in all partner organisations with a clear *can-do* attitude to the plan and the ideas that underpin it
- “ There must be a willingness to put extra-ordinary energy into fund-raising and to seeking other methods of funding the development
- “ The importance of a detailed Service Level Agreement between the partners

Plans on hold: Nash College is no longer seeking co-location with Lambeth College

Nash College has been working towards a co-location arrangement with Lambeth College for several years. The plan for co-location arose out of a commitment to the partnership approach and a desire to make radical improvements to the Nash College site. Although Lambeth College is considerably larger than Nash College the relationship between the two colleges was professional with mutual respect, both parties benefitting from the knowledge and approaches used by each college.

Unfortunately in 2009, in light of the financial recession, the fall in property prices and the difficulties that arose about capital funds from LSC the project collapsed. The charity owning the land for the project was reluctant to sell the property at the new, lower market

value, and LSC capital funds were frozen. Other potential sites proved unsuitable for the intended use.

Nash College has continuing links to local colleges and relations with Lambeth College are still good. There are numerous links with local organisations and plans are being developed to continue a partnership approach to provision and development through specific projects near to the current site.

A bundle of partnerships in the West of England: Farleigh FE College, Frome; Fairfield Farm College and Wiltshire College

Since its establishment some 10 years ago, Farleigh FE College, Frome has had a partnership arrangement with Wiltshire College and has been clear that this is the only way to work with its learners. It now also has similar arrangements with City of Bath College and Strode College.

Another ISC, Fairfield Farm College, set up a partnership with Wiltshire College some three years ago, and has also developed a reciprocal arrangement with Farleigh College. All three colleges, Wiltshire, Farleigh and Fairfield, have joined with Wiltshire Employment Services Team (WEST) to support college leavers with learning disabilities to gain employment when they finish college through a transition project called 'Learn to Earn'.

Farleigh College, Frome

Most Farleigh students, who have aspergers syndrome, attend one of the local GFE colleges for their educational courses which are often at Level 3, AS or A2 level; they attend for up to three and a half days per week, with direct learning support provided by Farleigh College. There is a base room at the GFE college for the Farleigh staff and learners. The remaining time in a learner's week is spent at Farleigh College developing independence skills and study skills or at work experience placements.

Formal partnership agreements are in place between Farleigh College and all three GFE colleges, and these include protocols around communication and arrangements for paired observations of teaching and learning. Farleigh makes judgements of its own Learning Support Workers (LSW) and the use of learning support by the lecturer. Management meetings between the colleges take place every term and the formal agreement is reviewed annually. Fees are paid by Farleigh according to the fee set by the college for each student attending each specific course.

In addition to the GFE college partnership, Farleigh has a number of arrangements for work experience placements. These include a formal partnership with Trident, a company that locates employers for work experience placements and carries out health and safety (H+S) checks, safeguarding checks and risk assessments on the placements, paid for by Farleigh. The college's own Transitions Co-ordinator also seeks work placements, arranges an interview for the learner and accompanies them to it, following which contact is made with Trident to carry out H+S checks and give clearance for a start date. Agreements outlining responsibilities for the learner and work placement provider are signed by both parties. Each learner has 1:1 support from a Farleigh College LSW who acts as a job coach at the placement.

Farleigh invites work placement providers to training in disability awareness, with particular reference to Asperger's Syndrome, and have invited employers to be members of the Advisory Board.

Fairfield Farm College

Three years ago Fairfield Farm College established a formal agreement with Wiltshire College which arranges for eight Fairfield students to undertake accredited Skills for Life qualifications at Wiltshire College in exchange for eight of their students undertaking practical vocational training at Fairfield. Also included in this agreement is a Fairfield tutor teaching at Wiltshire College for two hours per week in exchange for a Fairfield student undertaking a part time NVQ Level 1 qualification, with no funds being exchanged. If other NVQs are wanted for Fairfield learners, Fairfield pays Wiltshire College per course per student at an agreed fee. This fee is fixed for the course . regardless how long it takes to complete. Students from Fairfield gain external qualifications which they would not be able to gain otherwise, whilst students from Wiltshire College gain real work practical experience which they could not get at their own college.

WEST (Wiltshire Employment Services Team) – 'Learn to Earn'

Learners from Fairfield Farm College, Wiltshire College and Farleigh College, Frome also have partnership arrangements with WEST under a scheme called 'Learn to Earn'. The scheme is funded by a grant from LSC South West which is paid to Wiltshire College. This pays for a manager and two transition workers, the costs of the base offices (in three college sites: Trowbridge, Chippenham, Swindon) and additional running costs and managerial support.

The scheme aims to assist people with LDD to obtain paid work and is available to Wiltshire residents. Potential candidates are referred by one of the colleges (Wiltshire, Fairfield, Farleigh) to 'Learn to Earn' transition workers who assess suitability and also attend relevant reviews of the potential candidates. There is no limit to the number of candidates though residence requirements usually keeps the numbers to manageable proportions.

Learn to Earn workers support the preparation phase of about six months before the learner leaves college and give job-coaching to the candidates. Employment may be part-time or full-time but it has to be agreed with secured agreement from the employer. Some Farleigh learners have Saturday/ holiday jobs to prepare for Learn to Earn phase.

Key messages from these partnerships:

- ~ Partnerships take time (up to 10 years!), perseverance and patience to build up respect on both sides.
- ~ Provide on-going training within the partnership as required - at no cost to the recipient partner/s
- ~ Have partnership agreements, which clearly state each partner's role, their responsibilities, accountability, the need for monitoring and evaluation, dissemination of information and transparency on financial implications.

Wide ranging partnerships: National Star College

National Star College has a very active community contact partnership programme which has built up over a number of years. The links are local, regional, national and international and are linked to schools-college transition, further education provision, mental health provision and employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Some elements of these partnerships are outlined below:

Gloucestershire Federation of Colleges

Since 2006 National Star College has worked with The Gloucestershire Federation of Colleges (GFoC) to involve all local FE providers, general and specialist, together with the local education authority in a series of termly meetings to develop a response to Learning for Living and Work.

The group adopts a collaborative approach to initiatives that arise and bids for funding on a joint basis. This collaboration extends to providing the programmes and responding to the individual interests of learners as they develop, such as the pilots for Foundation Learning and the range of courses and qualifications arising from it. Some local colleges, such as Hartpury College (a land-based, animal science and sports college) and Gloucester College - have specific programmes at Level 3 which meet the requirements of some National Star learners.

The formal GFoC meetings and the supplementary contacts that arise from them offer good opportunities for sharing experiences about education, organisations and learners and there are several opportunities for joint marketing of provision.

LA partnerships

The college has also established a number of links with the Local Authority to help them meet their Local Area Agreement targets as well as to extend the college's provision and sources of income. LIFT (Local Improvement Finance Trust) funding has been used to support an organisation (Whizz Kidz) which has contracted National Star College to use its expertise to establish a travel training programme for learners with disabilities. This training is aimed at developing the learners' skills in using public transport to travel to their local college rather than having to use a taxi. This not only extends the skills of the learners but also saves the local authority a considerable amount of money. The scheme also provides the learners and their families with opportunities to learn about the National Star College and its provision.

The college has good contacts with local special schools and provides sports programmes using schools' facilities and its own to provide suitable and challenging programmes over periods from half a day to two days per week for 14 year-olds.

Lambeth and Southwark Councils

In 2007, a partnership arrangement was established with Lambeth and Southwark Councils, using Fast Track funding, following a piece of research by the London Learning and Skills Council. This partnership arrangement used National Star College's expertise to set up consultation groups to identify the type and quality of services that people with disabilities within the boroughs wanted. The college then engaged in joint planning meetings to take those findings forward and to support the local authority in setting up cross-provider steering groups to manage the process after the initial consultation.

Support for mental health conditions

National Star College has entered a partnership aimed at addressing the concerns of people experiencing mental health difficulties. The partnership involves Gloucestershire-based charities and statutory health bodies: Barnwood Trust, Gloucester Primary Care Trust, Independence Trust and Together Foundation Hospitals. These groups join with the college to deliver programmes which support people over 25 experiencing mental health difficulties. The partner organisations provide professional support and expertise, while the college is able to offer access to work experience placements and expertise through its employment service aiming to improve the clients' employability. In May 2010, National Star College is joining with the local Primary Care Trust to consider mental health concerns and other health barriers to work in an event hosted by the College.

Supported Employment Forum

Employment for people with disabilities is a concern that is addressed through the provision of work placements and through the active involvement in the Supported Employment Forum. The forum links employers, organisations that deliver employment programmes and schemes funded through Job Centre Plus/Department of Work and Pensions programmes, supported employment schemes and local third sector (voluntary) organisations.

The purpose of the forum is to share knowledge of and developments within the employment sector generally and to share information about employment and work placements. The forum provides a good opportunity to bring together large and small organisations together with a view to not only put forward different perspectives and also reduce duplication of provision and effort. Some of the organisations have had Learning for Living and Work funding, such as working with businesses to encourage and support enterprise development or offering disability confidence training. The view of the college is that the forum brings together a range of expertise to focus on the individual and improves opportunities and aspirations for those individuals.

Among the opportunities for work based curriculum delivery and work experience placements for learners is the Slimbridge Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust. Other employers provide similar experiences which extend the locations in which curriculum delivery takes place and increase the prospect of successful transfer of skills and Gloucestershire Industrial Services (GIS) provide supported employment. In addition the college provides Day Services for 18-55 year old people with a view to them moving into employment - voluntary or paid.

International Partnerships

Although the overseas partnerships do not directly involve the learners at National Star College, there is an impact on the college staff who take part in the opportunities to share knowledge of teaching skills with colleagues in developing nations. The global links partnerships with overseas schools have been established as a vehicle for sharing skills-teaching, the essential elements of social enterprise and developing employment skills for people with disabilities in other countries. The challenge for college staff working in those settings is how to deliver a programme when resources are minimal as a part of their continuing professional development.

Key messages from these partnerships:

- ~ Search continually for opportunities to develop partnerships, even if the connection may appear tenuous.
- ~ Co-operate with people who may appear to be in competition, as other opportunities often arise
- ~ A can do+attitude is crucial!

Partnerships and development: Orchard Hill College

In the past four years Orchard Hill College (OHC), a specialist day college, has increased its provision considerably with a series of new ventures all based around partnership working. It is in partnership with Carshalton College to run a purpose-built Vocational Progression Centre. OHC occupies and manages three of the four floors and each college enrolls and secures funding for their own learners. The other college facilities are based in 5 separate sites around the borough.

The OHC strategy for further development is to establish smallscale provision as close as possible to learners' homes in High Street locations. The emphasis is on community and work-related learning to build social and employment networks for familiarity with the community and support after leaving college. The programmes are all individualised in response to requirements.

Key messages from these partnerships:

- ~ Base the provision in the locality where it is needed . probably quite small halls or shops . Partnerships are formed around individually identified needs matched to identified opportunities.
- ~ Create demand and engender support from Local Authorities by ensuring that the college approaches or interventions with %difficult to place+learners lead to good success levels.
- ~ Collaborations always entail challenges which include: understanding each other's culture and ethos; understanding the mutual benefits; recognising the requirement for flexibility; ensuring excellent communication and interpersonal skills

Long standing partnerships: Treloar College

Treloar College has had a partnership arrangement with Alton College for over 25 years. One aspect is the delivery of bespoke training to Alton staff for the use of Alternative Augmented Communication (AAC) equipment, dual-training in moving and handling and Speech and Language Therapy training for new staff at Alton and Treloar colleges, delivered by Treloar.

Level 3, AS and A2 students now use Basingstoke College as well as Alton College for their studies and some additional vocational provision. A sports hall has been built in partnership with a local secondary school for the benefit of both parties.

Treloar has developed a considerable range of partnership arrangements throughout the South East of England:

- ~ Woking and Lewisham Colleges for outreach and to-reach work
- ~ seconded therapy using other providers' premises at Totton College (New Forest), Alton College and Guildford College
- ~ A Flexibility Programme, in which a young person from Lambeth College or Isle of Wight College may go to Treloar during their last year for an independent living skills component

As well as being involved in Action for Inclusion, South East Treloar is the lead facilitator for the 14-19 consortium for NE Hants Action for Inclusion. "Treloar's Direct" is a mobile assistive technology unit (bus/van) which is available to any provision in the South East that wishes to hire it.

Treloar learners go to University of Creative Arts in Farnham for photography and the University of Winchester summer school for additional studies.

Key messages from these partnerships:

- ~ Partnerships take a lot of work to set up and sustain
- ~ You need to know how to develop and to get going
- ~ They RELY on individual people's motivation and enthusiasm

Appendix 1

Acknowledgements and participating colleges

The project was coordinated on behalf of Natspec by John Gush, who would like to thank the college principals and senior staff for their time and effort in contributing to this project. He would also like to thank Chris Berry for his persistence in gathering the information and Alison Boulton for her consistent and perceptive encouragement and support.

The following colleges participated in the research:

Arden College	National Star College
Beaumont College	New College, Worcester
Coleg Elidyr	Northern Counties College
David Lewis College	Oakwood Court
Derwen College	Orchard Hill College of Further Education
Dilston College of Further Education	Pengwern College
Doncaster College for the Deaf	Pennine Camphill Community
Dorton College of Further Education	Portland College
ESPA Colleges	Queen Alexandra College for the Blind
Fairfield Farm College	Queen Elizabeth's Foundation Brain Injury Centre
Farleigh Further Education College, Frome	Regent College
Farleigh Further Education College, Swindon	RNIB College, Loughborough
Fortune Centre of Riding Therapy	Exeter Deaf Academy
Foxes Academy	Royal National College for the Blind
Freeman College	Royal School for the Deaf, Manchester
Glasshouse College	Ruskin Mill College
Henshaws College	SENSE East
Hereward College of Further Education	St Elizabeth's College
Homefield College	Strathmore College
Landmarks	Treloar College
Langdon College	Thornbeck College
Lindeth College of Further Education	Westgate College
Lufton College of Further Education	West of England College
Nash College of Further Education	Whitegates College
National Centre for Young People with Epilepsy	William Morris Camphill Community

Appendix 2

The survey questionnaire

1. Partnerships with other learning providers

a. Information

- i. Which GFEs or other learning providers are you in partnership with?
- ii. Are any specific funding arrangement attached to these partnerships?
- iii. What proportion of your students (roughly) is engaged in regular learning activity delivered by a partner provider?
- iv. What proportion of your students (roughly) is engaged in occasional learning activity delivered as and when appropriate by a partner provider?
- v. When and how did you go about setting up these partnerships?
- vi. What are the key admin and management arrangements?
- vii. Do you have a formal partnership agreement? What are the key areas it covers? How is it reviewed?
- viii. How does your assessment process take account of the availability of courses delivered by partner providers?
- ix. How does your programme planning process take account of the availability of courses delivered by partner providers?
- x. How is achievement data captured? Is it in the same way for partner delivered courses as it is for ISC delivered courses?
- xi. How do you carry out QA of your partner delivered courses? How does this differ from the QA processes you use for ISC delivered courses?
- xii. What staff training for ISC and partner staff takes place as a result of the partnership?
- xiii. Roughly how many hours of CPD takes place in connection with this partnership?

b. Evaluation

- i. Do students on partnership courses achieve better than those who are not? Statistics, anecdotes or just gut feel.
- ii. Do students who's ILP includes partner delivered courses achieve better destination outcomes?
- iii. What impact does working with a partner provider have on your staff?
- iv. What impact does the existence of the partnership have on the partner provider's staff?
- v. What are the benefits and difficulties of working with these partnerships?
- vi. Overall, does the partnership do what you intended it to do? How do you know?

c. The QI angle

- i. Has this style of partnership working contributed to improving the quality of your college's provision?
- ii. Does it have a separate area in your SAR?
- iii. Is there a separate area in your QIP for partnership working?

2. Other partnerships that enable curriculum delivery

a. Information

- i. What other partnerships do you have? This could include local businesses for work experience, community organisations or agencies or charities that support transition etc.
- ii. If it is not obvious from the previous answer, please define the purpose of each partnership mentioned.
- iii. Are any specific funding arrangement attached to these partnership?

- iv. Please provide some background on the process of setting them up?
- v. How do you administer and manage them?
- vi. How are these partnerships integrated into your SAR and QA cycle?
- vii. Would you characterise these partnerships as predominantly based at local, regional or national level?

b. Evaluation

- i. How well do these partnerships achieve the aims you set out for them? How do you know?
- ii. What are the benefits and difficulties of working with these partnerships

c. The QI angle

- i. Has this style of partnership working contributed to improving the quality of your colleges provision?
- ii. Does it have a separate area in your SAR?
- iii. Is there a separate area in your QIP for partnership working

3 Professional partnerships

a. Information

- i. What professional partnerships is your college engaged in? Examples would include PRD groups and the Natspec / LSIS Collaborative Improvement Project; partnerships with colleges or universities for staff development or research; partnerships local authority level such as the 14-19 partnership or the Local Disability Partnership Board (LDPB).
- ii. Are any specific funding arrangement attached to these partnerships?
- iii. Who takes part? How much management time do you dedicate to these activities?

b. Evaluation

- i. How well do these partnerships achieve the aims you set out for them? How do you know?
- ii. What are the benefits and difficulties of working with these partnerships

c. The QI angle

- i. Have these partnerships contributed to the way you structure your quality improvement planning processes?
- ii. In what way have these partnerships contributed to quality improvement in your college?

Any further information you think we should know about your partnership working arrangements