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Higher education strategies from further education colleges: evaluation of the pilot exercise in 2007-08

**A report to HEFCE by Professor Gareth
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Contents

Executive summary	3
Introduction: HEFCE pilot of HE strategies by further education colleges	5
Section one: the evaluation	7
The remit	7
Evaluation approach and methodology	7
Section two: the pilot process	9
Background	9
Selection	9
Form of appraisal	10
HEFCE briefing sessions	11
The strategies	12
Section three: the appraisal process	13
QAA appraisal	13
Regional team appraisal	16
Section four: responses in the first phase	18
The questionnaire	18
Interviews	18
Analysis	18
Production of the strategy	23
Section five: feedback	27
Feedback letters	27
Structure of feedback	27
Section six: responses in the second phase	31
The questionnaire	31
Interviews	31
Analysis	31
Feedback from HEFCE	33
Guidance and exemplars	40
Section seven: the case of partnerships	42
Responses relating to partnerships	45
Section eight: themes and issues	47
Participations and preparation	47
Appraisal and feedback	47
Guidance	48
Purpose	48
Burden	48
Partnerships	48
Process	49
IQER	49

Annexes	50
Annex A: List of participating institutions	50
Annex B: Draft guidance for the pilot submissions	51
Annex C: Final guidance for pilot submissions	52
Annex D: Draft appraisal criteria for pilot strategies	53
Annex E: Final appraisal criteria for pilot strategies	54
Annex F: Template for report	55
Annex G: Questionnaire 1	56
Annex H: Questionnaire 2	60
List of abbreviations	65

Executive summary

Purpose

1. This document reports on the external evaluation of the pilot of higher education (HE) strategies by further education colleges (FECs) undertaken between November 2007 and June 2008.
2. All stages and elements of the pilot process were evaluated. The findings and conclusions are reported here in full, including data from two questionnaires and two rounds of interviews with participants

Key points

3. In November 2006 HEFCE consulted on its policy with regard to HE in FECs ('Higher education in further education colleges: consultation on HEFCE policy', 2006/48) including the proposal that all FECs should submit a HE strategy. The proposal received strong support and a pilot programme was developed to test the workability of the implementation of the proposal.
4. From the submitted expressions of interest, HEFCE officers selected a sample of 30 (27 colleges and three partnerships) to participate in the pilot. These were drawn from different parts of the country and reflected a diversity of provision.
5. Colleges were positive about and benefited from participation in the pilot. The production or revision of a strategy encouraged a constructive assessment of their HE provision, and its strategic direction and development. The process of internal (sometimes external) consultation and approval of the strategy served to clarify FEC processes related to HE as well as raising its profile in the institution.
6. The appraisal of each strategy submitted in the pilot was conducted by a project team from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and by HEFCE regional teams. Six areas or sections for appraisal were identified. The QAA appraised five of these and made judgements on the basis of the internal evidence provided in the submission. The HEFCE regional teams appraised the other section and were asked to make judgements based on their knowledge of activities on the ground and council policy. This division of labour and the separate reporting of judgements to participants created difficulties and resulted in some inconsistency and unevenness. In many cases, regional officers were not familiar with the provision made by the FECs concerned, particularly where the HE was funded indirectly. This made it difficult to establish the completeness, appropriateness and reliability of the evidence and claims in a submission.
7. In the case of submissions from the three partnerships, different approaches were taken with respect to both the format of submission by the partners and the feedback provided by regional officers. Issues of ownership of a FEC strategy and institutional autonomy were highlighted which go beyond partnership submissions and draw attention to the relationship(s) between a FEC and the one or more HE institutions that act as funding and validating partners.

8. More detailed guidance to colleges would be welcomed regarding the format and content of a HE strategy and on the criteria to be applied in any appraisal.¹

9. There was a synergy with preparation for the QAA process of Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) and, thus, there is a potential benefit of linking the two processes.

¹ For this guidance to colleges see 'Request for higher education strategies from further education colleges' (HEFCE 2009/13)

Introduction: HEFCE pilot of higher education strategies by further education colleges

In November 2006, HEFCE consulted on its policy on higher education (HE) in further education colleges (FECs). The policy proposals presented in this document ('Higher education in further education colleges: consultation on HEFCE policy', 2006/48) covered four main areas:

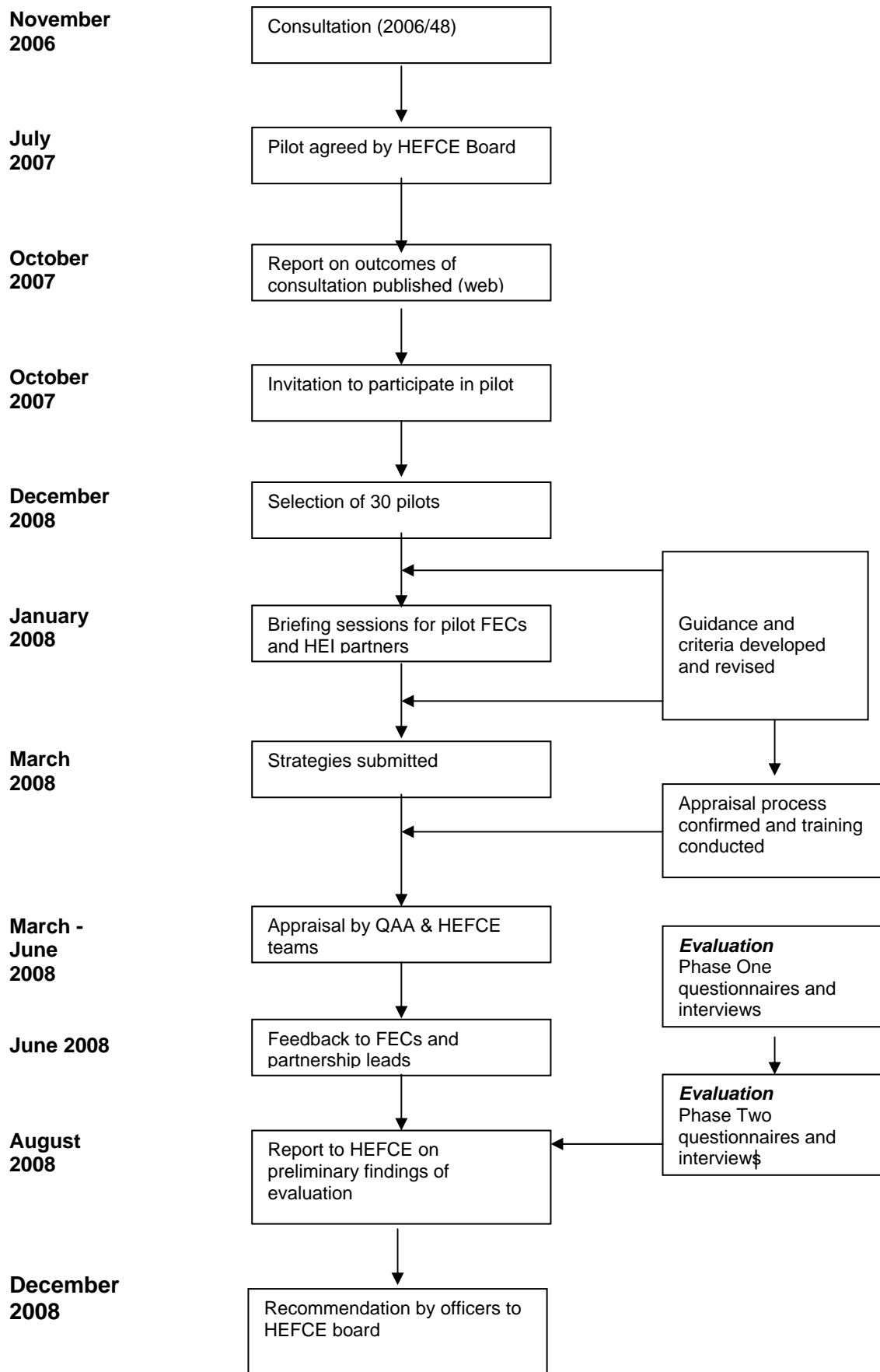
- the distinctive contribution that HE in FECs makes to HE provision overall
- the strategic development of HE in FECs
- Centres for HE Excellence in FECs
- funding and relationships

Very strong support was received for almost all the proposals and, in the case of those on the strategic development of HE in FECs, a decision was taken to implement these following a pilot of the new system in 2008. The pilot would enable HEFCE to review the procedures adopted for the submission and assessment ('appraisal') of the HE strategy documents prepared by FECs.

The pilot was conducted with a sample of 30 strategies submitted by individual colleges and partnerships. Following briefing sessions held in January 2008, institutions were asked to submit their strategies at the beginning of March. An appraisal was then undertaken by a team from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for HE, acting on behalf of HEFCE, and by HEFCE regional teams. Feedback was given to institutions by HEFCE in June 2008. The main elements and stages of the process are shown in Figure 1, including the questionnaire and interview studies undertaken as part of an external evaluation by Professor Gareth Parry and Dr Anne Thompson at the University of Sheffield.

An outline of the evaluation approach is given in section one of this report. In section two, the selection of sample institutions and the draft guidance and criteria for pilot submissions are described, including the themes arising from the briefing sessions. In section three, the processes of appraisal by the QAA and the HEFCE teams are detailed. In section four, a report is given on the findings of questionnaire and interview studies undertaken with participants soon after their submission of strategies. In section five, the form, structure and style of the feedback to institutions is discussed. In section six, a report is given on the findings from a second questionnaire and set of interviews undertaken with participants after they had received their feedback. In section seven, the matter of submissions from partnerships and feedback to members is considered. Finally, in section eight, the key themes and issues arising from the evaluation are summarised.

Figure 1 Summary of elements and stages of pilot



Section one: the evaluation

The remit

An evaluation of the pilot of HE strategies was commissioned in September 2007 and announced in HEFCE Circular Letter (27/2007) inviting FECs and partnerships to participate in the pilot process. The brief for the evaluation included the following specification.

To describe, analyse, comment on and report on the pilot of the development of strategy statements, including its stages, processes and judgements and the perspectives and experience of those involved.

The evaluation report will inform the advice to the HEFCE Board on the future implementation of the requirement for FECs to submit strategies for their HE provision.

Evaluation approach and methodology

The evaluation approach entailed collecting and analysing evidence based on five main sources.

1. Observation of briefing, training, appraisal and related meetings.
2. Questionnaire surveys of the participant institutions at two points in the pilot process.
3. Interviews with representatives of a sample of the participant institutions at two points in the pilot process.
4. A reading and analysis of internal and external documents, including the strategies submitted for appraisal and the feedback letters to participant institutions.
5. Interviews with HEFCE and QAA officers.

Feedback to the lead HEFCE officers was provided at regular stages, together with a summary of preliminary findings in August 2008. This feedback was based on the presumption that the process as evaluated would apply to all FECs providing HEFCE-funded HE (as well as non-prescribed HE (NPHE)) over a period of one to three years.

The evaluators received all documentation relating to the pilot process and were able to attend and observe the briefing sessions for participant institutions and some of the training sessions. Information based on these documents and meetings forms the basis of the analysis in section two.

A questionnaire was sent to all participants in the pilot immediately after the deadline for the return of the strategies on 1 March 2008 (see Annex G). Five submissions were selected for interviews with their institutional representatives: four individual FECs and one partnership where a representative of the lead higher education institute (HEI) and a member FEC were interviewed. The questionnaire returns and themes from the interviews are reported in section four.

A second questionnaire was despatched to coincide with the feedback given to participants in the week beginning 23 June 2008 (see Annex H). Again, five participants were selected for interview to explore issues: four FECs making individual submissions and one FEC which was part of a partnership submission. The questionnaire returns and themes from the interviews are reported in section six.

In addition, interviews were conducted with three HEFCE officers and two QAA officers. All interviews with were recorded and transcribed under protocols of confidentiality.

A total of 40 FECs and HEIs returned questionnaires or provided information during an interview; 27 FECs submitting strategies, three leads of partnerships (two from HEIs and one from a FEC) and 10 FECs within two HEI-led partnerships. They have been identified by randomised codes:

- FECs 1 to 27
- partnerships A, B, C
- FECs in partnerships A1 to A5 and B1 to B5.

Section two: the pilot process

Background

In November 2006 HEFCE issued a consultation on its policy with regard to 'Higher education in further education colleges: consultation on HEFCE policy' (Policy development consultation, 2006/48). An analysis of the responses was published (on the web) as 'Higher education in further education colleges: outcomes of the consultation'. These documents and others relating to the pilot can be accessed on the HEFCE website (www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/heinfe).

Strong support was received for the proposal that FECs should submit HE strategies to HEFCE and, in July 2007, the board agreed to develop a pilot programme to test the workability of the implementation of such a requirement.

In October 2007 the HEFCE chief executive wrote to all Heads of HEFCE-funded HEIs, and of directly and indirectly funded FECs and universities in Northern Ireland ('Higher education in further education colleges: implementation of HEFCE policy', Circular letter 27/2007) informing them of how HEFCE intended to implement its policy for supporting HE in FECs and to invite colleges to express an interest in participating in piloting the process HEFCE was developing for colleges' HE strategies.

The circular letter reported that HEFCE had received overwhelming support for the proposal to request a strategy on higher education provision from all FECs, whether their HE was funded directly or indirectly. Thus, HEFCE would request a HE strategy from all FECs and assess them; this process was to be piloted.

For the pilot we envisage collecting a sample of about 30 strategy documents, drawn from across the nine regions, and reflecting the diversity of provision (size of provision, method of funding, qualification aim, and mode of study etc). Groups of colleges, with their higher education institution partners, might wish to submit a joint strategy, and we would wish to include such examples within our pilot. We will assess the strategy documents with the help of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and with the involvement of our regional teams. It will be a process owned by HEFCE.

We are inviting colleges to volunteer to participate in the pilot. In particular, we would encourage those FECs with a comparatively small amount of HE provision to give serious consideration to participating. This will help us to ensure our process for assessing strategies is fair, and one that creates as low a burden as possible.

Colleges were requested to express an interest by 12 November 2007.

A total of 141 FECs expressed an interest, taking account of those involved in a partnership (eight of these had also made an individual expression of interest). Nine partnerships submitted an expression of interest; eight led by an HEI and one a partnership of colleges with a Lifelong Learning Network (LLN).

Selection

As expressions of interest were received from FECs, they were categorised, using data from 2005-06, by region, headcount and full-time equivalent (FTE) and funding route (direct and indirect; directly funded only; indirectly funded only).

HEFCE officers constructed a grid of small, medium and large providers and selected a range of 27 colleges across the regions as well as three partnerships. An additional consideration was based on advice from the regional teams regarding local issues such as significant recent reorganisation, which might impact on how institutions could contribute to the process. Guidance was also received from the QAA as to the schedule for Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER).

In the event, one college which was in merger negotiations withdrew from presenting a strategy but another which was completing merger during the period of the pilot found the process of producing the strategy, while complicated by restructuring, a very helpful process (see section six).

The 30 selected participants were sent on 29 November 2007 a confirmation letter and a copy of draft guidance (see Annex B) for the pilot, setting out HEFCE's expectation of what an HE strategy might usefully address. Additionally they were invited to a developmental workshop in January 2008 (either 15 January in Leeds or 18 January in London). Colleges were invited to send two representatives as well one from partner HEIs.

The purpose of each day is to clarify the process for the pilot, create a forum for discussion about this and facilitate colleges sharing experience of developing their HE strategies.

Strategies (as stated in the circular letter) were to be submitted by 1 March 2008. Appraisal would take place over the period March to May with feedback provided by HEFCE in June.

Form of appraisal

HEFCE expects (as set out in 2006/48, para 38) that provision of HE in FECs will primarily focus on the needs of local and regional communities and, thus, the regional element demanded a role for the regional teams in the appraisal of strategies. However, it was decided that the majority of the appraisal would be conducted on HEFCE's behalf by a QAA project team. The regional teams did not have the staffing resource available to commit to full appraisal (initially of 30 strategies). Nor did their expertise and experience lie in such evaluation; QAA was a body with such expertise (quality assurance) and with standing in the academic community.

Five criteria for appraisal were initially drawn up by HEFCE and QAA officers and distributed and discussed at the briefing sessions (see below). These reflected the issues raised in the consultation document (2006/48).

- A: Overview
- B: Regional, local and, where appropriate, national priorities
- C: Strategic management of HE
- D: Academic standards and quality assurance in HE
- E: Effectiveness of academic staff in HE and the HE student experience.

This last category was subsequently split into two, adding criterion F: The HE student experience.

The QAA appraised all except criterion B, which was appraised by the regional teams. The process of the appraisal is set out in section three.

HEFCE briefing sessions

At the briefing sessions, HEFCE staff made presentations contextualising the pilot within HEFCE policy on HE in FECs and workshops were held focusing on the draft guidance for submission of strategies and a draft of criteria (see Annex D) to be used in appraisal of the pilot strategies to be applied by the QAA (then sections A, C, D, E) and HEFCE regional teams (section B). Additionally, a presentation was made by the Higher Education Academy and a panel responded to questions from the audience.

Key themes from the sessions included the following:

- the diversity of experience and the volume of provision in colleges (and partnerships) was reflected in questions and, when asked to rank how close their college was to producing a strategy to meet the guidance from one (low) to 10 (fully prepared), colleges ranked themselves from one to nine
- many college representatives were eager for guidance as to the length and detail expected of the strategy
- some suggested examples and/or a template would be useful. Others asserted the strategy should reflect the FEC's approach but if this would not be acceptable then a template should be provided
- there was general concern about the timescale (6 weeks) and whether the strategy would need to be approved through formal channels
- while some colleges were submitting as a partnership, others represented a spectrum of positions with regard to consulting with HEI partners, particularly those with multiple HEI partners; some were clear that it was the FEC strategy, sent to HEIs for information only
- colleges wished for guidance about sources of funding for growth
- the timing of the revision of the Codes of Practice (HEFCE and QAA) was raised
- competition (between HEIs and FECs and between FECs) within a region was cited as a difficulty in producing a strategy reflecting regional drivers. If there is a need for brokerage, who would provide this and how?
- Some participants raised the purpose and comparability of the process with regard to expectations of HEIs with regard to strategy and the Learning and Skills Council's (LSC) responsibility for the infrastructure of the institution
- the issue of strategy being underpinned and validated by an operational plan was raised.

Themes addressed in responses from HEFCE and QAA were as follows:

- the pilot would be a learning process for all involved and should be treated as such
- the timescale meant that strategies would be unlikely to be signed off formally. They were drafts and colleges would not be held to them
- 'bundles' of 'naturally occurring' documents could be submitted with indications of where the criteria were addressed
- the small size of regional teams meant this would need to be a desk-based process – both in evaluation and feedback
- HEFCE have a view of what HE in FECs should be in general but colleges who wished to make a case for different, e.g. niche, provision should do so
- the degree of collaboration with partner HEIs would vary
- the process was about enhancement of quality not withdrawal of funding; however some FECs might decide that their provision cannot address quality issues
- strategies would be one of threshold criteria for consideration for Centres for Excellence
- strategies should include NPHE.

The guidance was subsequently revised and the criteria amended and retitled (from 'Criteria for a higher education strategy', to 'Draft criteria: appraisal of a higher education strategy', Annex E) and sent to participants in the pilot on 4 February 2008.

In the first questionnaire respondents were asked whether they had found the event useful and the results are reported in section four.

The strategies

The strategies were submitted by 1 March 2008. They were very variable in format, length, scope and detail – as was to be expected since the guidance was deliberately not prescriptive and in the light of the advice that 'bundles' of documents could be submitted (see the briefing sessions). The criteria for appraisal of the strategies issued by HEFCE were used by some FECs as a framework for their strategies but not by others.

Most strategies appeared to have been written for the purpose of the pilot, but a minority were pre-existing documents. Some included supporting documentation which had been produced for other purposes; for instance, one FEC included a very substantial Business Case which provided underpinning data; another an HE Teaching Learning and Assessment strategy. Others included appendices to cover, for instance, management structures or quality systems. However, others referred to appendices or underpinning documents that were not in fact submitted or had not yet been developed. One FEC submitted some 'documents which outline our approach to HE in the college' and explained that they were 'in the middle of evaluating our provision strategically and producing a new strategic plan'.

The range of submissions is demonstrated at one extreme by a FEC which submitted a particularly comprehensive strategy with six appendices including the Academic Co-operation Agreement with the HEI, regional profiles and detailed information about college and partnership systems. At the other end of the continuum were very brief general documents and in one case an incomplete draft in the words of the college: 'a very rough first draft which has been circulated to the senior management team and is clearly nowhere near ready for publication – in any forum!'

A decision had been made not to ask FECs to include a profile of their provision on the grounds that this would duplicate data returned through the normal channels. However some colleges did include statistical profiles – of varying detail. The data available to the HEFCE officers selecting the sample and to the evaluators were for 2005-06 and it became evident during the evaluation process that up-to-date numbers would need to be provided by FECs; further, figures for NPHE are not collected by HEFCE.

Section three: the appraisal process

In essence, the role of the regional teams was to evaluate the way in which the strategy played to external, regional, issues using their regional knowledge, while that of the QAA was to assess or validate the content of the strategy 'internally'. This was formalised by a separation of scrutiny of section B from sections A and C to F.

HEFCE agreed a process with the QAA to undertake appraisal of the majority of the elements of the strategy.

The QAA project team initially proposed a model of appraisal which reflected the review process; this would have involved a team approach with two 'appraisers' (as opposed to 'reviewers') for each strategy coordinated by a 'co-ordinator'. This was, in a number of iterations of consulting with HEFCE officers, pared down to ensure that the costs of appraisal were not disproportionate to the level of HEFCE funding allocated to smaller providers and in the expectation that the pilot process would provide a format for scaling up (i.e., the process must be sufficiently streamlined to be used for the full complement of providers).

The final model had 10 appraisers each assessing three strategies with their work overseen by a co-ordinator taking responsibility for two appraisers and the project leader or 'method co-ordinator' having oversight and making final judgements.

In a model more closely following established review process, appraisers would have engaged in peer review (that is, reviewers are recognised as peers by the organisation whose work is being scrutinised) moderating each other's views and discussing their evaluation with their review co-ordinator. It would have included, if not a visit to the institution, dialogue with the institution and sight of the draft report. In the event, the role of the co-ordinator was essentially editorial – to ensure consistency rather than to judge the report against the strategy submitted. This was described as a 'calibration', rather than a 'moderation' model.

The lead HEFCE officers determined the process of the evaluation of section B with the regional teams. Regional teams allocated strategies to Higher Education Advisers (HEAs).

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between the two processes over time.

QAA appraisal

Appraisers were selected from people who had applied to work as IQER reviewers. Three filters were applied. Appraisers had to be high scorers on the IQER selection process and their experience had to include an aspect of management of HE in an FEC or an HEI collaboration or a national agency. Finally a balance of appraisers with current work in FECs and in HEIs was determined. While the regional team's appraisal of section B was premised on possession of local knowledge, the appraisers were allocated out of their own region to avoid any conflict of interest.

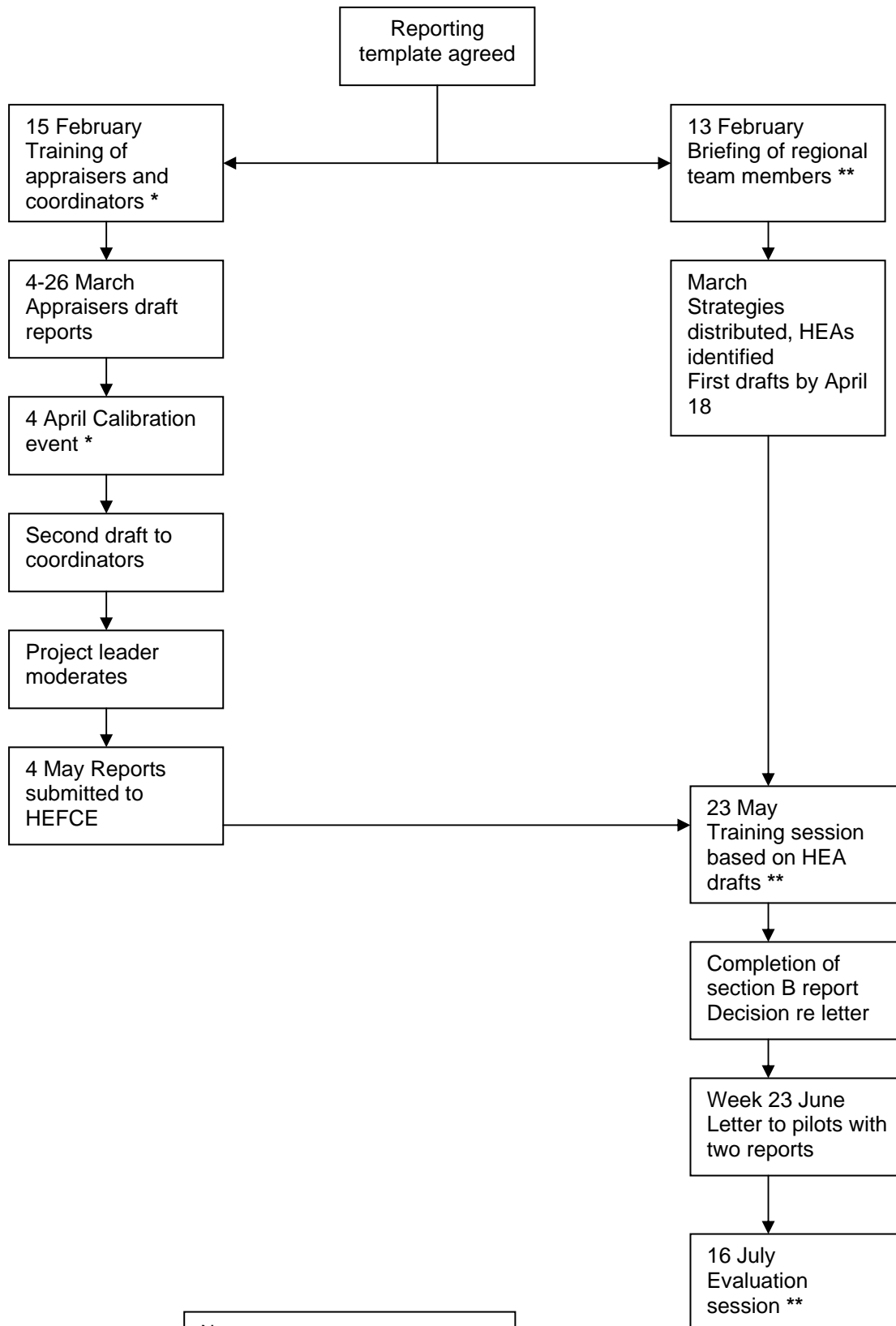
Ten appraisers were appointed (from 20 trained), each to appraise three strategies and working under one of three experienced co-ordinators whose role was to 'calibrate' and to edit. The team was led by a QAA officer who gave final scrutiny to all the reports.

A rigorous training session for the QAA team was held on 15 February 2008. This was observed by a HEFCE officer and the comprehensive documentation used in the

Figure 2 Flow chart of the appraisal process

**Appraisal by QAA
Project team**

**Appraisal by HEFCE
Regional teams**



Note
 * HEFCE officer present
 ** Project leader reports

training was received by the evaluators. Appraisers and co-ordinators were trained to report against a template and to draft reports (on a fictitious strategy). The template was devised by the QAA project leader and HEFCE officer and included a range of questions or sub-criteria for each of the six sections (see Annex F).

Appraisers then developed draft reports on the strategies (with the exception of regional, local and national priorities, section B) and these were scrutinised by the co-ordinators who attended a calibration meeting with the team leader – one of these meetings was observed by the evaluators and a HEFCE representative on 4 April. During the process, appraisers and co-ordinators were encouraged to be empathetic and to take statements on trust if there was internal, including implicit, evidence that a strategic issue was being addressed. It was emphasised that this was not equivalent to scrutinising a self-evaluation document during review.

Appraisers were instructed to answer each question (see Annex F) with a closed answer – yes or no, with qualifiers as appropriate – and to give the source of the judgement (in square brackets).

They communicated electronically with the project leader and co-ordinators. Two particular queries were referred to HEFCE regarding the usage of ‘higher level skills’ and the definition of ‘non-prescribed higher education’. It was evident at the observed calibration event that there remained a confusion, with some appraisers using higher level skills exclusively in the sense of the QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ).

At the calibration event, co-ordinators expressed concerns which reflected the scaling back of the model from the usual QAA approach to review, reporting that they found it difficult to edit without having read the strategies themselves (which they tended therefore to do although time for this had not been written in to the process) and pointing out the lack of team discussion as well as the fact that they could not go back to the originator to check evidence and interpretation.

A particular issue was the three partnership submissions. While one partnership submission was a single sub-regional strategy on behalf of six colleges, the other two were from formal HEI/FEC partnerships. In both these cases, a strategy for the partnership was submitted by the HEI along with separate submissions by each college. No proposal had been made in advance as to how partnerships should submit strategies, nor as to how to appraise or feedback – it was intended this would evolve from the pilot. The QAA appraisal and report on the partnership submissions were conducted as one process (although the time allocation had to be adjusted for the two composite submissions; each with six elements). This – and the response of the regional teams – was to cause a difficulty at the feedback stage, see sections five and seven.

At the calibration events the co-ordinators raised substantive issues regarding content and assessment of the strategies as well as practical questions about style and format of the reports. The team leader then circulated guidance to enhance consistency of the QAA reports. It was stressed that these were to go directly to the colleges and should be positive in tone and developmental.

The co-ordinators noted the difficulty in determining the accuracy of an appraisal if they were not required to themselves read the strategy nor could the appraisers check the accuracy, or indeed realism, of claims. These two issues impacted on the robustness of the model.

The QAA completed the process and submitted the reports to HEFCE for 4 May 2008.

Regional team appraisal

A briefing session for regional teams was held on 13 February 2008. The documentation was distributed and a case study discussed. The QAA project leader attended to outline the proposed QAA appraisal process.

In early March, regional teams were informed that the strategies were now available and sent further copies of the guidance on completing the appraisal and the template (see Annexes C, E and F) for the four questions to address with regard to section B.

While the QAA appraisers subjected the strategy documents to an internal analysis – and a decision had been made to allocate them to colleges out of their own region or contact – the regional teams were told to use their local knowledge.

When appraising the HE strategy use additional knowledge of the institution and of HE provision within the sub-region.

You should take into account:

- HEFCE strategic priorities
- existing provision that may compete with a college's aspirations
- knowledge of HEI's spread of indirectly funded provision
- demand as set out in any regional studies known to you
- significant regeneration projects locally/in the region, including regional economic strategies.

Regional teams (Regional Consultants and Advisers) decided who in their team of Higher Education Advisers (HEAs) would be allocated strategies reflecting their allocated caseload of HEIs and FECs (in the main directly funded). The majority of HEAs looked at two strategies.

Regional teams were asked to complete the template by 18 April and then these were looked at by HEFCE officers. One of the regional advisers acted as a conduit for questions and clarifications during the process. Electronic communication systems were used.

On 23 May 2008 a further training event was held (and observed by the evaluation team) for the regional team members involved in the process. The HEFCE lead officers distributed examples taken from the draft reports and gave advice for revision. It was stressed that the reports would be sent to the college. However, comments at the final meeting in July to evaluate the process suggested that the HEAs who ultimately wrote the reports were not always aware of this.

The QAA project leader reported on the successfully completed QAA process.

Discussion drew attention to several significant issues. Team members were concerned that reports might appear to endorse 'aspirational' strategies for growth or aspirations not in line with HEFCE policy (e.g. for a move to direct funding); in particular, elements of reports by QAA appraisers might be read as endorsement of strategic aims which the regional team would not wish to support and might be at variance with the appraisal of section B. The teams raised the question of the relationship between an indirectly funded FEC's strategy and that of an HEI or HEIs. It was also noted that the funding data related to 2005-06 and the teams were not therefore clear about the current volume of provision. (The currency of the data was also an issue made apparent in the interviews where growth or a decline in numbers had often occurred in the interim period.)

Questions and comments made in group discussions suggested that, unless a college was one with a high volume of direct funding, the regional teams were often unfamiliar with the colleges and with their funding – both LSC and the operation of multiple indirect funding routes. The view was advanced that HEIs could, or should, submit strategies for indirectly funded FECs.

Discussion highlighted some mismatch between the two, separate, QAA (completed) and regional (draft) reports.

The initial expectation – of HEFCE officers and the QAA project team – had been that a single, composite, report with a covering letter highlighting elements from both sets of appraisers would be sent to the pilots. However, at the beginning of the process the regional teams were firmly of the view that there should be two separate reports and that the letter from HEFCE should not attempt to interpret the QAA appraisal. At the May meeting it was confirmed that feedback would be in the form of two reports representing a different focus and knowledge base. These would be sent with a covering letter from the regional team – to be signed by either the regional consultant or the HEA who wrote the report at the discretion of the team.

Letters would go out to colleges and the leads of partnerships in the week of 23 June 2008 (see section five).

At a subsequent meeting on 16 July (observed by the evaluators) attended by HEAs who had written reports, the dominant view was that a single report based on contact between the QAA and the HEFCE appraisers would have been desirable. The regional team members felt that, were the model to be retained, collaborative working with the QAA appraisers would be desirable.

Section four: responses in the first phase

The questionnaire

Questionnaires were sent to most participants in the pilot at the beginning of March after submission of the strategies; in the case of those who were being interviewed, the questionnaire was sent in advance of the interview and the questions covered during the interview.

For partnerships the lead and all member FECs were sent questionnaires. In the case of the sub-regional college partnership a single return was made on behalf of the partnership; in the other two partnerships, the HEI lead and each FEC made separate returns.

The questionnaire (see Annex G) covered the reasons why institutions wished to participate in the pilot, whether they had existing HE strategies, their response to the briefing sessions, the revised guidance and the process of producing the strategy.

The total of responses (including those completed during interview) was 39. Bar charts demonstrate the responses to the closed questions.

Respondents were generally senior managers: Deputy/Vice or Assistant Principals or Directors of HE. Other titles indicated responsibilities for external partnerships and some for management or coordination of HE provision.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with representatives from five of the pilots representing a range of types of provider – region, volume of provision and mode of funding. One partnership was included and here the HEI lead was interviewed prior to submission of the strategies. All FEC representatives were interviewed after the strategy had been submitted. Interviews were open ended, recorded and transcribed.

Analysis

As indicated above, the questions on the questionnaire were covered during the interview. The analysis that follows includes evidence and quotations from both open questions on the questionnaires and from the interviews.

Participation in the pilot

The decision to participate was usually made by the senior management team, sometimes initiated by the principal (the letter inviting expressions of interest went to principals); in other cases the respondent took the initiative. In the case of the three partnerships the decision was taken at a partnership meeting.

Some FECs had volunteered because of the nature of their HE provision – small or large – or because they were a ‘dual sector’ institution. In most cases the reason cited for wishing to participate was to support production of or to test their strategy – whether reflected in an existing formal document or as current activities or plans – and was often in a context of internal and external change. The impact of IQER was frequently cited and in some cases specific plans to develop a HE centre. Other FECs were at an early stage in development and wished to focus a strategy and to benefit from guidance and good practice.

“To focus minds at the college on how to plan strategically for the further development of higher education at the college and to look at strategic links between

higher education development and the development of further education courses at the college.”

(College 14)

“The overall college strategy included a number of key aims relating to the development of higher education. A new post, Director of Higher Education, was created in 2006 to take forward the college strategy for higher education. The pilot provided an opportunity to focus the development of that strategy and promote internal college understanding and commitment, and to benefit from the collective experience and feedback.”

(College 19)

[after merger of two colleges] “The new [college] now serves the whole of [county] less [town]. HE is significant within the new college but there are opportunities to develop further. As part of a completely new college structure the role of Strategic Director for HE has been created. It was felt appropriate to determine the direction of the new college’s HE provision as part of the overall college strategy. Participation in the pilot was a logical decision, particularly as the guidance and launch events were expected to be helpful and supportive. The decision was therefore made by the college Senior Management Team (SMT). The decision was supported by our partner HEIs.”

(College 23)

“... HE is once again affirming its position as a strategic priority for the college and it is important therefore to establish a clear strategic focus for our development. There has been significant change in the organisation and the opportunity to contribute to the accommodation strategy and to consolidate our learning from in-house IQER simulation was an opportunity not to be missed. The participation also enables us to explore our lines of communication and decision-making and to test out understanding of new responsibilities and priorities...”

(College 1)

“We were already appraising our HE strategy before we were aware of the pilot, so the timing of being involved was excellent. With the college migrating from traditional HNDs to foundation degrees (FDs) and with IQER playing a key role in monitoring the management of HE in the college, it was very apparent that we needed to make some changes quite quickly.”

(College 12)

“The college is at an embryonic stage in terms of its HE provision and wishes to develop a strategy for HE based on a clearly agreed and shared understanding of the purposes and aims of this provision and the role of HE within the college as a whole. This will be incorporated within the overall college strategic and operational plans in order to inform coherent future planning, management and delivery of HE in the college.”

(College 10)

In one college the HE manager had earlier decided it was important to evaluate the options for the college HE provision:

“... I’d already presented a paper to the SMT about what I felt our strategy should be – this was before merger [planned for the next academic year with a larger provider of HE]; I felt we needed a proper strategy. We’d always had a strategy of a paragraph which basically said - ‘niche provision’ - and I thought we ought to be a bit clearer about what we were going to do. So I put a paper to them saying ‘we’ve got

three positions: we get rid of it – because it's so small; we keep exactly as we are – which is neither fish nor fowl; or we grow, sensibly – and this the benefit'. And so we had a meeting of the SMT and myself and we talked through the three options and we decided yes, growth was right, but just very, very sensibly. Make sure the business plan was there properly, that the quality was there and everything was in place and that was the sensible option. So we had this brief discussion and then I wrote it."

(College 9, interview)

For this respondent, the pilot was seen as providing the opportunity to test the strategy and benefit from feedback.

In another college the consultation had sparked a reconsideration – HE numbers had dropped in a context in which the college was focusing on its FE provision.

"Really that was what started me thinking, 'yes, we need a strategy and we haven't got one', and we've come from up here and we know we've dropped and we know we've got to do something about it but no-one's ever sat down and thought 'well what is the strategy and how are we going to get that strategy?', it's just happened to us almost. And so I felt that it was important that as a college we took a hard look at what had happened and where we were and what we wanted to do in the future, so that was really what kick started it.

... I think it was important that we did say to ourselves 'do we want to be in HE or do we want to just focus on what we know we can do and do really well – which is FE?'. By then we were an outstanding college and we knew that we'd got that right, we were doing extremely well with that. We're focusing on employer engagement and Train to Gain and foundation learning tier - there's so many initiatives that are coming at us all the time in FE - and so this is just another thing, another ball to keep up in the air. So I thought it was important that we actually sat down as a team of senior managers and said 'do we really want to be doing this or not, and if we do what is it that we want to do with it and how do we want to develop and manage it?'"

The pilot provided catalyst to finalise the strategy:

"So when the idea came up of being involved in the pilot it just seemed to me and to [the principal] to be an ideal opportunity to make us focus on it and it gave a target. It was very tight but at least I knew that I had to do it by the end of March and that gave me a real motivation to get it done. I was writing the self-evaluation at the same time and I found that the two things actually worked quite well together, because obviously part of the self-evaluation is about where you are as a college with your HE and what you want to do longer term, so it helped. It was tough in terms of timescales but it was a good exercise to go through."

(College 27, interview)

For another college the catalyst had been contact with a HEFCE officer as the consultation on HEFCE policy was being developed. In this case the strategy was completed prior to the pilot and submitted in its original form.

"... we [respondent and the HEFCE officer] talked about the consultation process, so at that point I realised I'd have to get on and get one sorted out. We hadn't got a document prior to that as such - we did report on HE separately from FE, of course we did, we did a management report - but there wasn't a separate strategic plan for HE."

(College 22, interview)

One college had been questioning its provision of HE and developing a business plan.

“The decision to participate was as much to do with whether we should make - since the volume of HE work had significantly reduced over the past four years - a strategic decision to withdraw from HEFCE-funded HE and concentrate on other funded non-prescribed HE streams such as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in the workplace.”

And:

“The business case for the strategy related to non-prescribed HE and concentrated on HE markets that can be attained through effective workplace training and assessment in selected occupational or vocational areas. An example of this is the wish to develop Construction Technician and Health & Social Care NVQs at level four.”

(College 18)

The partnerships wished to test their strategy across the members and develop consistency of approach.

“The main reason was that we were already committed to working together on both individual HE strategies and, as part of the [partnership] remit is to support planning and development of HE across the sub-regions, this fitted in with agreed work for the [partnership]. The support of the HEFCE initiative was a bonus.”

(HEI lead partnership A)

“... the HEFCE pilot process was seen as an obvious progression from the collaborative work that had already started.”

(College lead partnership C)

“When it [the letter from HEFCE asking for expressions of interest] came out the co-ordinators were quite interested in it and I suggested to the principals and our Vice-chancellor that we offer to do this as a partnership. And all the principals agreed; we had some discussion... there were some concerns about ‘will it end up just being the university’s?’ and ‘if the university’s going to write it for us ...’. I’d had discussion with [HEFCE officer] actually before I’d suggested it to them – my picture of it was an overarching partnership strategy in which each of the colleges would sit on their own, reflecting their own HE in FE strategy. Once we’d ironed that out, all the principals were signed up to it. And so we made the offer on that basis, we said ‘This is what we propose to do if we are included’. So it was relatively painless really, it wasn’t a huge issue. It’s turned out to be a fairly complicated piece of work and it’s not as easy as it sounds to do. It wasn’t, as I say, something that we had a huge soul search over once it was clear that each college would have its own strategy which would reflect the particular nature of that institution - which is only right and proper.”

(HEI lead, partnership B, interview)

Existing HE strategies

Respondents were asked whether the FEC had previously had an HE strategy document (separate from an overall college strategic plan); in the case of partnerships, whether there was a formal strategy for the partnership. Where there was a strategy, respondents were asked if it included NPHE. Figure 3 demonstrates that, while the majority had a strategy, a significant proportion did not and for those who did have a pre-existing strategy, a slight majority did not include NPHE.

Figure 3

Did the College (or partnership) have an existing HE strategy? If so, did it include non-prescribed HE?

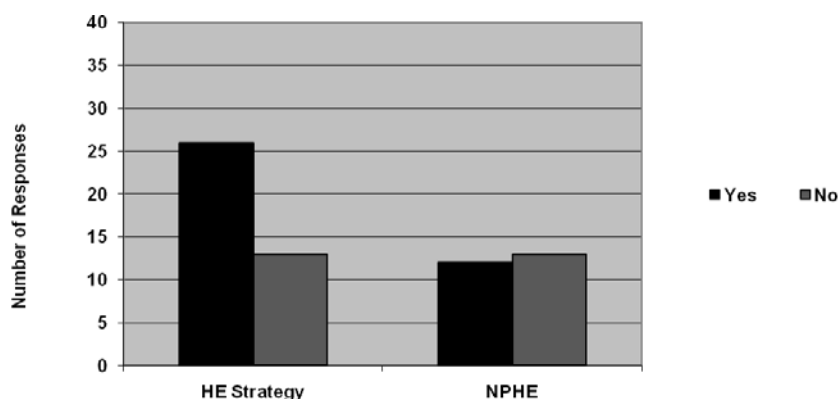
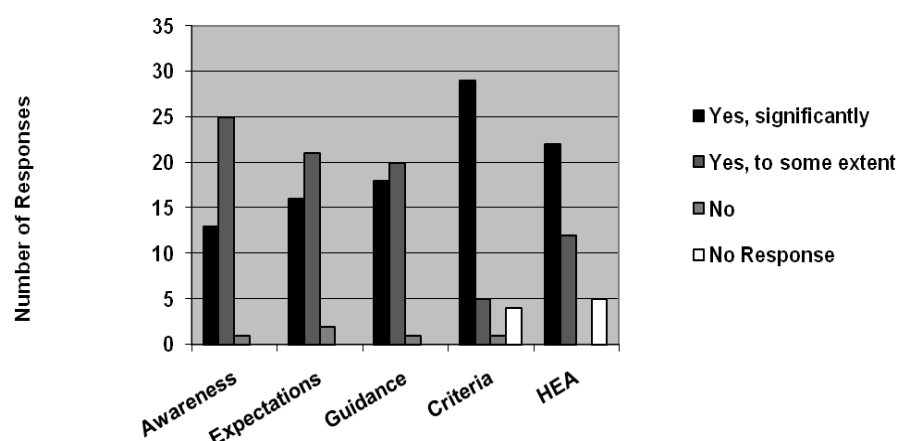


Figure 4

Did your representatives find the HE developmental workshop useful?



Briefing sessions

Respondents were asked whether their representatives had found the HEFCE briefing presentations and discussion useful.

- Did they add to your awareness of HEFCE policy on HE in FE?
- Did they help to clarify what was expected of the HE strategies to be developed in the pilots?
- Did they help to clarify what you would need to do to develop a strategy, taking account of the draft guidance?
- Were the criteria for appraising the strategies transparent and helpful? Was it clear how – and by whom – they would be applied?
- Did the presentation by the Higher Education Academy add to your knowledge of its work in this area and indicate resources that might support the development and implementation of an HE strategy?

Figure 4 indicates that the great majority of respondents found the sessions useful with the most useful element being the criteria for the appraisal.

Revised guidance

After the briefing sessions the guidance and the criteria were revised and sent to participants. Respondents to the questionnaire were asked:

- Did the revisions make the documents clear and helpful?
- Did the guidance provide a framework to support production of your strategy?

Again the response was positive, see Figure 5.

Figure 5
Were the revisions helpful? Did the guidance provide a framework?

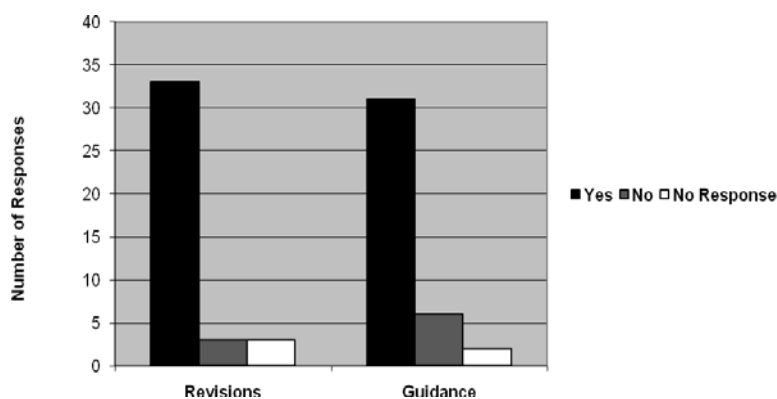
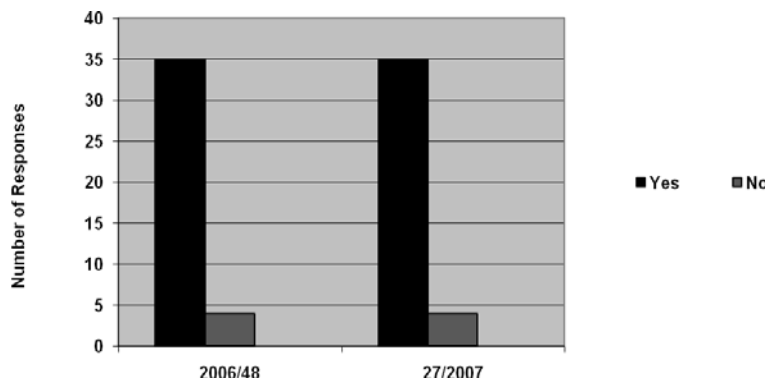


Figure 6
Did you use the consultation and the circular letter in drafting the strategy?



Production of the strategy

As might be anticipated, in most cases the respondent had drafted the strategy, usually in consultation – with varying degrees of formality – with colleagues.

It was generally signed off by the SMT and occasionally by committees or the corporation but it was sometimes indicated that the timescale for the pilot precluded this. With the exception of the FECs within the partnerships, the majority had not developed the strategy with HEI partners (although they may have shared it); a negative response was sometimes accompanied by a comment about the timescale and/or the fact that it was a draft.

Overwhelmingly FECs found the production of the strategy a useful process, as did the leads of partnerships.

“The process was helpful as it enabled colleagues to consider how HE provision could be developed and integrated effectively in the overall college strategy.”
(College 5)

“Very useful. Consultation with staff is important in terms of ownership of the strategy: consultation in terms of partners, etc. and other stakeholders is important in terms of the college’s wider responsibilities.”
(College 11)

“It was a useful opportunity to engage all HE colleagues in reflecting on where we are now and where we intend to be in the medium term. It clarified the expectations of both staff and governors and encouraged us to think more broadly about what we do and the evidence base we use on which to base our judgements.”
(College 24)

“... the most positive aspect was locating the strategy within the wider economic context of the [county] Local Area Agreement, and confirming that the provision we offer is appropriate to local and regional needs and the basis on which to build HE further.”
(College 18)

“Yes, we have amended our HE strategy as a result of this process and the sessions attended with [the partnership] partners were extremely useful and very supportive in terms of sharing good practice and offering a consistency of approach across the region.”
(College A1)

Participation in the pilot acted as a catalyst for review and for formalisation of strategy in some cases.

“... we obviously had an HE strategy, it was unwritten, it was formulated in bids to HEFCE for additional student numbers and [the VP] said ‘we are carrying the strategy round in our heads. We should make sure it gets on paper...’. Everyone knew what the strategy was, it wasn’t a case that we had just dreamt it up, it was just articulating it on paper. And that in itself was a big catalyst for a lot of the other developments that we’ve seen, and I think that’s when heads of school began to buy into it in a very, very positive way.”
(College 2, interview)

For some respondents who were new to post the process provided a useful trigger to familiarisation with the role.

“Being new to the role of HE Co-ordinator, I found the process useful in assisting me to become acquainted with HE provision in the college and the rationale for providing it. It was also useful for raising the profile of the provision within the college management group.”
(College 3)

[A senior manager who had recently been given the role of strategic lead on HE] “... I started off collating information which I turned eventually into an HE operational plan which is very, very detailed about who does what, how it all works, the liaison and

everything else. To write a strategy I had to know - how does it all work? And I thought, if I'm finding out all of this it would be really useful if I produce this, then I can give a copy to everybody else and say 'this is what we do, this is how it all hangs together, this is who does what'. So the starting point was finding all the information out. I spent a lot of time talking to our HE Co-ordinator in-house, a lot of time getting information together. We already had an HE strategy but it was about 57 pages; it was very chunky. It was more of a business case than... it had a different focus. We had that to begin with so I wasn't starting from scratch.

It's been really useful... ”
(College B4, interview)

For the (same) partnership lead:

“Yes definitely. Oddly enough, even though the university has been involved with this partnership for so long it never did have a single definitive document about it - it's in other strategies. It's in the Academic Strategy, it's in the Curriculum Strategy, it's in the overarching university objectives, there's a bit in Inclusive Participation, there's a bit in Workforce Development but there's nowhere that says 'this is what we're about in this partnership, this is why we as a university are involved in HE in FE'. And for the colleges, I would say that none of them have, I think – and I think they would agree – none of them have, with the exception of B2, something that you could really say 'this is a strategy'. There's one or two operational plans and then something that looks like a business case in one which was used for looking at the funding case for investment for a centre, and others just don't have anything. So, for the people who have nothing, it's been a very supportive process, giving a bit of shape and direction to it and for the people have something, it's an opportunity to check whether it's actually a strategy or a set of tactics.”
(HEI lead partnership B, interview)

Respondents were asked to comment on both positive and negative aspects. Some respondents noted that the short timescale had been problematic and others cited a lack of clarity as to how much operational evidence needed to be included.

“Extremely useful process. But at this stage it's a draft proposal with some specific proposals that were formulated rather rapidly (even if these had been part of wider underlying discussions). Negative was the time frame and the fact that the authoring of the strategy was confined to one person with input from others in a rather peripheral way.”
(College 7)

“Yes, the process was useful. The main positive aspects were pulling together a number of strategic documents and linking them in a coherent way and having the opportunity to consider our relationships with HEIs. The negative aspect was the tight timescale for producing a new document using the revised guidance.”
(College 15)

“We already had a strategy in existence. It was useful to update it and compare what HEFCE required with what we had. The negative side was that I felt a lot of operational as opposed to strategic information was required.”
(College 4)

“Yes, this was a useful process but it was felt that far too much operational detail was required in order to meet HEFCE criteria. In order to meet these criteria, the college produced and submitted a detailed operation plan to support the strategy document.”
(College 21)

“The strategy was simple as it already existed. But the guidance forced us to provide contextual information which we would not normally provide in a strategy document so it became a much more complex document than any of our other strategies. It therefore became a much more elaborate process than normal.”
(College 6)

For another college, conversely, it helped to differentiate strategy from operation:

“Yes. Helped to clarify priorities and direction. Helped to differentiate strategy from operation more clearly than hitherto. It helped to see the similarities and differences between the strategies of the other partners.”
(College B2)

Respondents were asked whether they had drawn on the HEFCE consultation (‘Higher education in further education colleges: consultation on HEFCE policy’, 2006/48) and on the circular letter (‘Higher education in further education colleges: implementation of HEFCE policy’, 27/2007) in drafting their strategy. Overwhelmingly they had done so, as seen in Figure 6.

Section five: feedback

Feedback letters

It was agreed that letters from HEFCE would be sent to the principal and copied to the person who had submitted the first questionnaire (or been interviewed) in the week beginning 23 June 2008. However, this did not always happen in practice and some feedback was delayed.

It had been agreed that regional teams would decide whether the letter came from the Regional Consultant or the Higher Education Adviser (who had produced the report) and practice varied.

There were two standard templates for the letters and regional teams decided which was sent. In all but four cases (excepting the partnerships dealt with below) the standard wording expressing confidence was used:

We are confident that the College has taken a strategic view of its HE provision, which among other things builds on the College's FE provision, fits within and adds to HE provision in the area, and addresses higher level skills.

Three colleges were asked to 'explore further points raised in the feedback report' and another urged to finalise a strategy. In this case a strategy was not submitted to deadline but other documentation was sent along with a comment in the email that a draft would be forthcoming. It was sent in, but not in time for the QAA reviewers to appraise it and this caused confusion as the respondent (who was interviewed) was under the impression that the report had been based on the draft.

Structure of feedback

The QAA reports (addressing sections A and C to F) were presented in a consistent format and, in the main, with comparable detail and length (proportionate to the length of the strategy). While section B was not addressed, on some occasions use was made of information provided in section B.

However, feedback from regional teams on section B was variable. It usually included commentary on issues that need following up, but in some cases it was noted there were no issues to follow up and in some no comment was made.

Comparability of QAA project team and the regional team approach

In some cases reports were essentially descriptive – echoing the content of the strategy – while in others they were evaluative and critical. Both QAA and regional reports demonstrated this variation.

College 27 provides an example where both the regional and the QAA feedback were neutral – reporting what was in the document, briefly in respect of the QAA and extremely briefly in the case of the regional team. The regional appraisal included a final summative sentence which commented positively on the strategy 'This is a focused strategy, with clear areas of priority that make sense with regard to regional and national priorities'. The FEC manager however commented that 'further feedback on how our strategy meshes with these local and regional priorities would have been helpful'.

For College 23 and College 7 the two reports were evenly matched – both were evaluative and positive. For College 23, the regional feedback indicated knowledge of the FEC and its

recent merger (although it is historically mainly indirectly funded) and concluded 'This is a solid and appropriate strategy for the college following its recent merger and position in the region. There are no specific issues to follow up.' The manager was positive about the feedback. At College 7 the college manager found the feedback 'full and thorough and generally fair...'

However, at College 22, where the letter expressed confidence, the first three sections of regional team feedback, while fairly extensive, were simply references to the content of the strategy and in the section of the template which asked 'Are there any issues that need following up?' the response was 'None at present'. There was no reference to knowledge of the FEC (despite it having direct funding). The QAA report however contained critical feedback with several opening 'Yes, but in part only'; 'Yes, in part'; 'No, not clearly' and variants of these phrases which suggested there were 'issues'. The strategy had been written before the final guidance and criteria had been circulated and thus was not structured to reflect the sections A to F, but nonetheless a close reading suggests that the appraisal was somewhat overcritical and the college managers challenged aspects of the report (see section six).

Colleges questioned (see section six) why strategies were being requested. Regional teams in discussion (see section three) questioned whether feedback on the content of a strategy based on 'internal' evidence would be seen as endorsement. Generally feedback was not developmental but that given to College 3 from the region on its (brief) strategy provided an example of more detailed and developmental advice.

"The priorities identify the broad approach and focus of the College's HE provision, however this does not provided a detailed picture of how the College intends to respond and address local and wider sector needs within HE. It is not always clear from the strategy how the College will actually address these priorities, and therefore they are somewhat aspirational, although this can be expected within a strategy document. It may be useful for the College to break down its priorities into smaller chunks of work or activities and where possible, set these against a timeline either as a subsequent iteration of the strategy or as part of a more detailed action plan."

Evenness of evaluation

Scrutiny of feedback and the strategies suggests unevenness. A case study is offered by a comparison of College 26 and College 16.

The strategy for College 26 was brief (four pages) but it was supported by three operational documents. In the email sent with the submission the college commented: 'The strategy covers the period 2007-2010 to coincide with the current FE strategy and is written in a format consistent with this FE strategy.' The strategy for College 16 was even more brief (three pages) and unsupported by any documentation.

However, the QAA and the regional reports were both phrased in more negative terms for College 16 than for College 26. The QAA appraisal for College 16 has many 'Yes, partially' and four clear 'No'. That for College 26 uses 'Yes, but limited' or 'very limited' in most instances with no 'No'. However, while College 26 was advised 'to explore further points raised in the feedback report' (i.e. confidence was not expressed and the college strategic view was 'noted'), College 16 was advised that 'We are confident that the College has taken a strategic view of its HE provision'.

In the QAA appraisers' reports much use was made of qualifiers and appraisers were requested to provide thorough referenced evidence for their use. However, there were

examples of inconsistency where evidence cited suggested a more definitive or, alternatively, a more qualified response was merited.

The meaning(s) of higher level skills and the definition of NPHE were both raised during the training and coordination stages of the QAA appraisal (see section three) but there remained examples where reference to the usage of higher level skills in the policy context was not noted and where reference to NPHE was missed where the term itself was not used (i.e. where reference was made to named qualifications or to 'professional' programmes).

Internal and external evidence

The QAA appraisers were necessarily working on the basis of the evidence provided by the documents themselves – and had been allocated cases out of their own region.

In some cases feedback from the regional teams was clearly based on some or close knowledge of the college's HE provision; in others, it was apparently based solely on internal evidence from the documentation.

Differences between regional teams with regard to the question 'Are there any issues that need following up?' were striking. Some made no comment, some generally endorsed the strategy in a summative comment, some identified specific areas which could be developed in a document. Some were very positive, others queried the strategy (even where general confidence had been expressed in the letter). Some called for a level of detail that had not been called for (although it may well be that it should be a requirement). In some cases comments were not 'issues' and in others went beyond the evidence available in the strategy.

A selection of comments is set out below.

- This is a comprehensive, interesting and ambitious plan. Should all the objectives be achieved, it will significantly enhance the HE experience at [college].
- The strategy is exciting, ambitious and dynamic. The strategy has been clearly thought out and identifies associated risks and ameliorating contingencies.
- This is a focused strategy, with clear priority areas and measurable objectives. There are strong links to national and local priorities, which address the needs of stakeholders, employers and students. The strategy does not raise any issues that require additional follow-up work.
- This is a fairly brief strategy and while it does set out the priorities for HE in the College it is not always clear how the College will actually address them.
- The HE strategy does not provide detail on the current or forecast size of provision which would provide additional useful background in which to understand the full context of the College's provision and appraisal of the strategy. Finally, we would suggest that the College considers providing more detail to how it intends to deliver against its priorities and the estimated timescales, which may form part of a subsequent iteration of the strategy or a supplementary action plan.
- Overall the direction of the plan is good, as the aims and priorities identified in the plan are well thought out to meet local and regional needs and the strategy is appropriate for the college. However, there is not much detail on the delivery, so how would the college monitor its aims and priorities without some targets and objectives to measure against? A little more detail and information for what the college hopes to achieve, coupled with some targets and objectives would help strengthen the plan.
- The aspirational tone of the development aims for the college should be noted as these will depend on working closely with partners and stakeholders. These are:
 - reach a headcount of at least 1,000 FTEs by 2010

- to become a Centre for Higher Education Excellence by 2010
- to gain FD awarding powers by 2010.
- The College wishes to have direct HEFCE funding [one of 3 comments]
- There is a danger that the college does not have capacity to achieve all aims/key performance targets. Senior management may be particularly stretched.
- The strategy states that strategic priorities of HEI partners will be responded to, but there is no indication that these are being considered, i.e. where is the evidence? The same is true of the statement that they will make use of the opportunities presented by the Olympic Games.
- The strategy document is aspirational, but rather vague.

Regional teams expressed (at observed meetings) a concern that the feedback on strategies might be taken to be implicit endorsement. This may not be an issue beyond the pilot, but a response from one college suggests that it had interpreted feedback as endorsement when it commented in the questionnaire return: 'The feedback concluded with the remarks that no further work was required'. However, reference back to the report indicates that this comment was made in relation to section B and the wording was 'I do not consider there to be any issues that require following up in the light of this strategy'; a standard comment relating to follow-up rather than an endorsement.

Section six: responses in the second phase

The questionnaire

A second questionnaire (see Annex H) was sent to all respondents just prior to the feedback from HEFCE – which was scheduled to be sent out in the week of 23 June 2008. This asked for any further comments on the process of completing the strategy, on the feedback on each section of the report (sections A to F), on the overall experience of participation in the pilot, on the next steps with regard to the draft strategy and for any comments which might inform HEFCE policy and future guidance.

This second questionnaire had a lower response rate (27 returns out of the 39 questionnaires in phase one) reflecting the return date just before the end of term and the need to cut off further pursuit of responses in August in order to make the preliminary report to HEFCE.

Responses to closed questions are summarised in bar charts. Note, although there were 27 returns the bar charts are based on 26 as one return made from a FEC in a partnership simply stated the respondent had nothing to add to the return made by the lead.

Interviews

Five pilots were selected for interview; four individual FECs and one member of an HEI-led partnership. These interviews were conducted in July 2008 after the feedback letters had been sent out. The evaluators were in possession of copies of these letters.

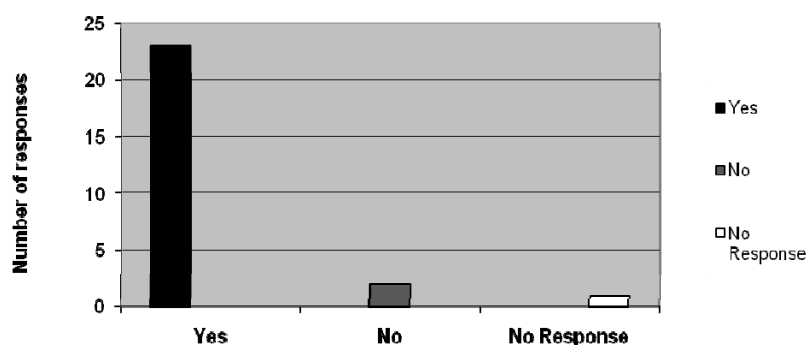
Analysis

Completion of the strategy – further comments

This question and that on the overall experience of participation in the pilot generally reflected the positive experience reported in the first questionnaire. See Figure 7.

Figure 7

Did you find the overall experience of participation in the pilot useful?



“The process of completing the strategy was very useful and the overall process for the strategy pilot, including the feedback, has been developmental.”
(College 15)

“The College now has a much more comprehensive strategy in place to support the further development of its HE provision.”

And:

“The strategy produced by the College as a result of the pilot was a much more strategic document than it had been in the past which is really positive. Previously the strategy was a list of the College’s intentions regarding HE developments and how these linked into the overall vision and priorities of the college.”

(College A1)

“I wouldn’t have done this [writing a new strategy immediately on taking up strategic responsibility for HE after merger] unless I’d been part of the pilot, and that was really helpful. I didn’t realise just how helpful it would be until I’d done it, and I probably would have found the process much more difficult to do a year down the line without really having time to sit back and think ‘where are we going?’. So the timing was actually helpful. A particular added benefit to being part of the pilot was that we were originally picked for the very first round of IQER but in discussion with HEFCE and QAA it was seen as better to take it sequentially - the pilot would be more appropriate first and IQER subsequently. So that’s been helpful in that we would have had an IQER last year and I don’t think we’d have gained the benefit from the IQER that hopefully we’re going to get now. So the timing has been right.

(College 23, interview)

“... you can do these things because you have to do them and you can do them because they’re useful and I don’t know that you always know when you embark on it which it’s going to be, but it did prove to be useful.”

(College A2)

One respondent reported that when he started to collect ‘reference material’ he recognised that his marketing department was primarily concerned with advertising and promotion rather than doing market research and ‘being a source of expertise’ and so he had to develop the expertise himself.

“It was very pleasing to write that bit [regional context] and confirm that the curriculum we were offering was relevant and right and the way we were thinking about developing it was relevant and right as well; that was really encouraging. I’ve got a view that on occasion higher education is developed within institutions, or in areas of institutions, where the direction is not actually relevant, and it’s driven by things other than need. It can be driven by staff wanting to develop a particular area for their own interests rather than anything else – that’s a very negative thing to say, but I have seen that happen elsewhere.”

(College 23, interview)

One college had decided they did not wish to complete a strategy for the pilot as participation in the early stages had led them to re-evaluate and determine to refocus their higher education, moving away from franchise partnership relationships and focusing on niche provision with, primarily part-time, programmes feeding from their vocational FE and non-prescribed higher education, often work-based.

“I wouldn’t say it was this project that made us decide that, because we were on a path along those routes, but it may well have precipitated it. We have a core funding that is our bread and butter if you like and then we do a number of responsive business proposals in the course of the year. And we look at whether we have the staffing, the resources, validation and various other things to support how much

contribution it would make and what are the likely outcomes. And that's analysed by the SMT at various times during the course of the year. So we've got good monitoring and scrutiny procedures at [college], and when you start to analyse these things on individual case-by-case basis then it focuses the mind on whether this is the appropriate course of action. If the case can't be justified and explained then it's probably the wrong case. So we end up at the point where we know that there's something wrong with the products at [college site] with the HNC in Business Admin - the falling numbers, unsustainable. There are mixed reports through the external verifiers and external examiner system. It doesn't lend itself well to the model that's being used at [another college site] with the construction. So you get to the point 'there's something wrong with this and we do need to change it'. And when this came along it was the catalyst for us to consider whether it was the appropriate product and the appropriate way to go."
(College 18, interview)

One college had changed its management team after volunteering for the pilot and subsequently determined not to submit a separate HE strategy but to develop a new integrated strategy through an extensive consultation process. The representative reported in interview two:

"And so, we should have, by the end of September, the full strategic plan for the institution, including a change of mission statement, for the Corporation to approve, and also the strategic themes. All the staff in the institution have fed into the strategic themes."
(College 13, interview)

They had submitted some pre-existing documents by the deadline and subsequently sent through a draft outline of the new strategy. However this was not received in time to send to the QAA appraisers and this caused confusion as the college assumed the feedback – both parts – related to the new strategy. In retrospect, for the respondent, participating in the pilot was not very helpful for the college as 'in a way the pilot was putting additional pressure of trying to rush things through before we were ready really'.

Feedback from HEFCE

The feedback letter was from the regional team to the principal or partnership lead (see section five) and attached were two reports – from the QAA appraisers for sections A and C to F and from the HEFCE HEA for section B.

Respondents were asked in the questionnaire whether the feedback on each section was:

- Clear?
- Comprehensive and sufficient?
- Helpful, providing guidance which will support further work on your strategy?

The majority response was that all feedback was clear, comprehensive and helpful although in most cases it was less comprehensive (than clear and helpful), most notably for section B. See Figures 8 to 13.

Figure 8
Overview (from QAA appraisers)

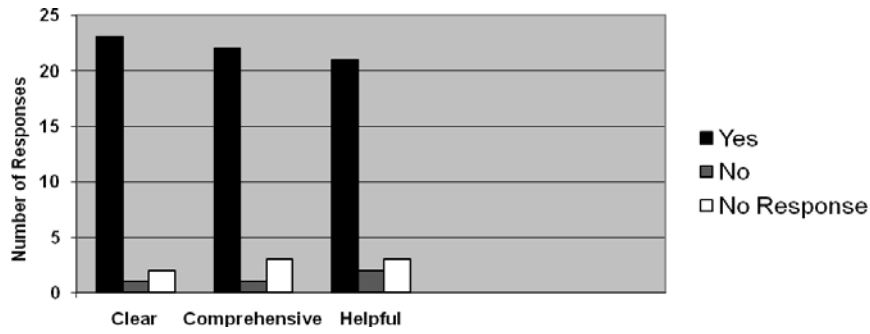


Figure 9
Regional, local and national priorities (from regional teams)

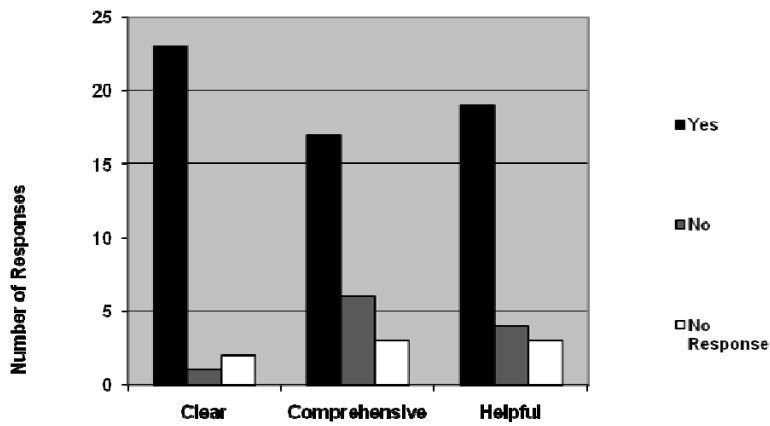


Figure 10
Strategic management of HE (from QAA appraisers)

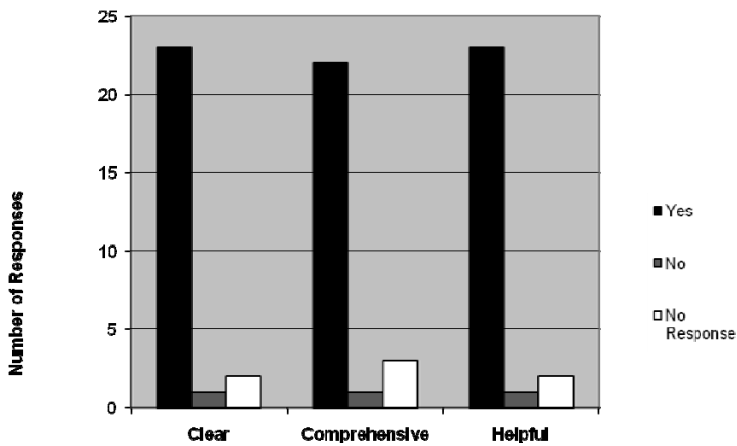


Figure 11
Effectiveness of academic staff in HE (from QAA appraisers)

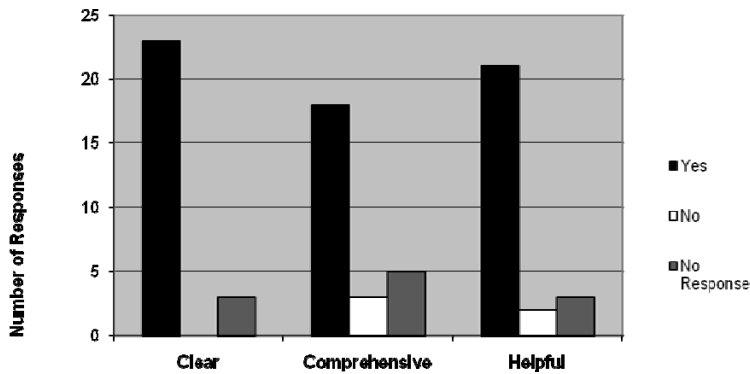


Figure 12
Academic standards and quality assurance in HE (from QAA appraisers)

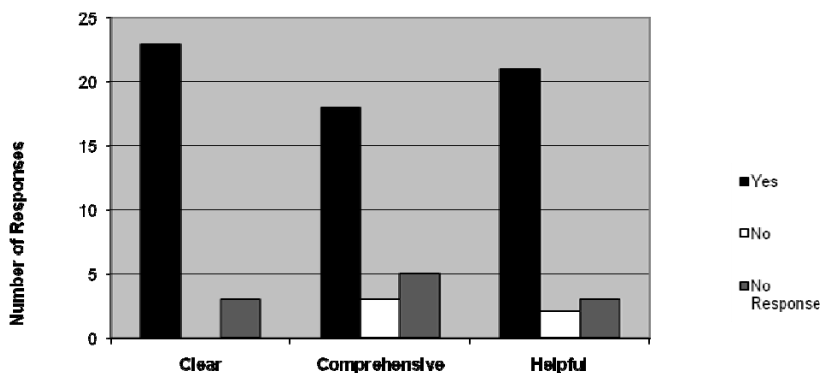
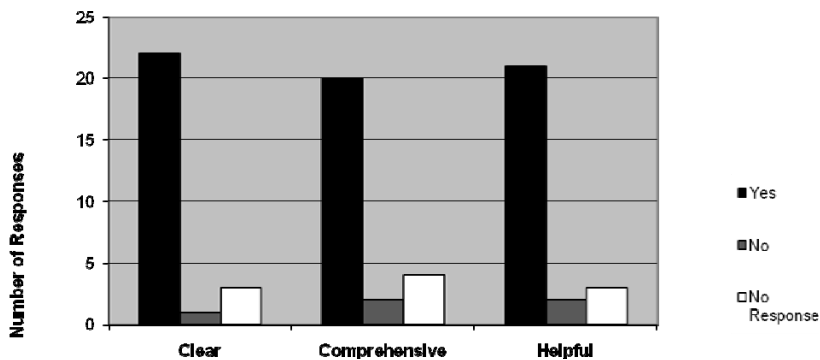


Figure 13
The student experience (from QAA appraisers)



Despite this response, where there were open-ended comments they suggest a less positive picture. One college (in a partnership), despite having said the feedback was clear, comprehensive and helpful, commented, in relation to feedback on Academic standards and quality assurance:

“The paragraph referring to [the college in general feedback given to the partnership] refers to our committee structure, however, it criticises the reference as being

unclear. But we should not be putting detail of quality assurance processes in this document.”

(College A3)

A college which had reported the feedback on section A was clear, comprehensive and helpful, nonetheless commented:

“Whilst I agree any feedback positive or negative is helpful, and hence my agreement with the tick boxes above, I do find a number of the comments difficult to accept.”

(College 22)

Another where the respondent had indicated that the feedback was clear, comprehensive and helpful in every section made no specific comments but added the final comment:

“The biggest issue in the feedback is the use of the word ‘limited’.”

(College 26)

One college found the feedback on effectiveness of academic staff not helpful:

“Whilst I accept the comments, I am a little concerned that the HE strategy was expected to include detailed information about staff workload and remission and I am not sure that this is a valid link with staff effectiveness. Clearly FE colleges work quite differently to HEIs and have different ways of dealing with issues of workload and remission and I would not have expected to address this in a strategy document.”

(College 27)

Occasionally colleges were confused about the respective feedback from QAA and regional teams. ‘The feedback from the regional teams [sic] (sections A, C, D, E and F) provided extracts from the submission with scant constructive feedback as to what required further work’.

Some read into the feedback ‘requirements of the QAA’. One college commented:

“Some of the requirements for the strategy were a little obscure and it wasn’t entirely clear what QAA required.”

(College 4)

It is recognised by HEFCE officers that the two templates and the approach to writing the reports/appraisals were different between QAA and the regional teams. This is reflected in some comments from respondents.

“It is good preparation for the real thing, however the approach to evaluation by HEFCE regional teams and QAA teams results in a rather schizophrenic report.”

(College A3)

[in the context of the two reports] “... what we’d say in FE is, you definitely need an IV in there somewhere to make sure that the marking is standardised.”

(College 22, interview)

Feedback on section B was most likely to attract criticism for its brevity.

“Comments re part B were of a different style to the rest and not as comprehensive for some reason.”

(College 26)

“This commentary though generally supportive was rather thin on areas for further development. This may reflect the fact that we have had little engagement with our regional team and perhaps this would be useful prior to the further development of the strategy itself. We felt that this area of regional and local needs could have been more developed. Clearly HEFCE have an issue with providing advice and guidance bearing in mind that they do not see themselves as having a fundamental role in local HE planning.”
(College 7)

“Repeats what is in the strategy – not really commenting on whether this is sufficient or good.”
(College 5)

The next steps

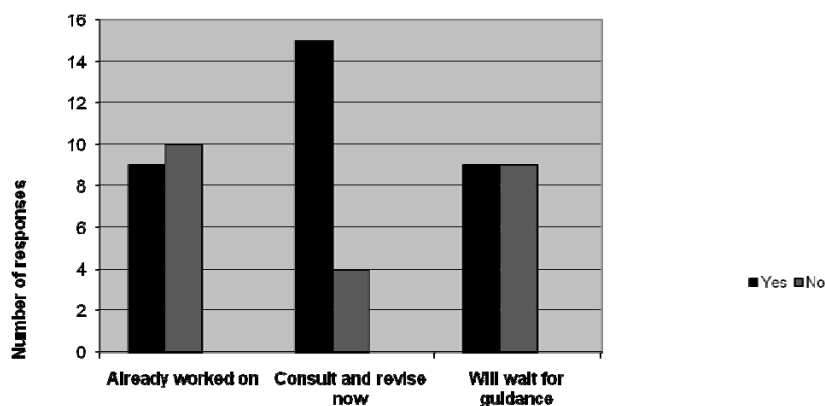
Respondents were asked what they proposed to do next with the draft strategy:

- Have already worked on consultation and revision
- Will consult and revise now
- Will wait until HEFCE circulates further guidance based on the pilot evaluation.

Figure 14 indicates that the majority had already worked on the strategy and/or were planning to after receipt of the feedback.

Figure 14

What does your college propose to do next with your draft strategy? (all that apply)



Asked how many years – one, two, three, four or five – the strategy would cover the clear majority indicated three years with a significant number indicating five (see Figure 15). Nearly all respondents planned an annual revision.

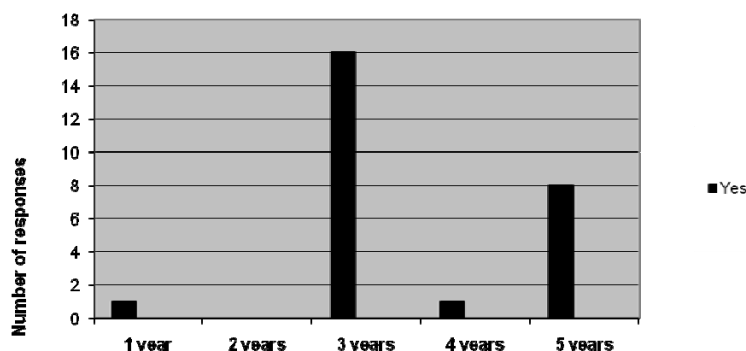
It had been made clear at the briefing sessions that strategies submitted in the pilot, as draft strategies and produced within a short timescale (see section two) would not be expected to have received formal approval by college or corporation committees. Respondents were now asked how the revised strategy would be agreed (e.g. a process of consultation with staff and partners (FECs and/or HEIs), by SMT, by report to Academic Board or Standards Committee, report to Governing Body.)

All the respondents who answered this open question were intending to take the strategy through the senior management group and through formal channels, the majority of which included corporation.

Regional teams

Respondents were asked whether they currently had contact with the HEFCE regional team and, as indicated in figure 15, the majority had some contact.

Figure 15
Period of strategy



FECs were asked what support they would look for from the HEFCE regional team. Most responses looked for some support.

FECs which currently had no contact called for:

“Meeting to discuss guidance based on the pilot evaluation related to the specific feedback on the College’s pilot strategy.”
(College 15)

“Not sure – would like to meet a representative to see what they could do for us.”
(College 9)

“It would be very useful for the college to have an opportunity from time to time to talk to regional team.”
(College 24)

And a FEC with ‘limited’ contact:

“General advice and guidance about developments in HE, the regional HE priorities, establishing a working relationship which would add to the confidence of all parties.”
(College 26)

The pilot process

Respondents were asked whether they wished to draw the evaluators’ attention to any issues which might inform HEFCE policy for HE in FECs and to inform the process and guidance for FECs producing HE strategies.

Some FECs drew attention to the issue of collaboration, indicating the difficulties of addressing the relationships with partner HEIs if they were working outside a formal collaborative partnership (such as those represented by the two HEI-led partnerships in the pilot). One FEC took issue with the comment by the QAA appraiser that they had not stated how they would build on collaboration, pointing out that they were rarely in the position to

have a 'true dialogue' and were usually seen as delivery partners – this underpinned their decision to increase rather than decrease their partnerships in order to have a range of specific collaborations rather than a dependent partnership.

The limited time was consistently cited (also in questionnaire 1) as was fact that the guidance and criteria were modified after the start of the process, delaying a final version to work to.

“On the whole it was a useful experience. However, the phase from the briefing event to the submission date was very short. There was then a lapse of many months till the feedback was received. It may be that more intermediate meetings of all involved in the pilot would have been more helpful in receiving interim feedback and discussing these as a group. Indeed, the group briefing session was very good and I would have welcomed more discussion of this type for mutual sharing and planning.”
(College 25)

“Although the overall process has been positive, it has been protracted and has taken most of the academic year to complete. The timescale should be clearer and shorter, next time around.”
(College 15)

Respondents often raised the issue of who the strategy is for and how it will be used, pointing out that strategies needed to match other organisational strategies and to address other internal and external stakeholders and, in particular, the governing body.

“What I’m not very clear about, and I think it comes across in the tone of some of this commentary [the reports from the appraisers] is, ‘what’s the audience for this strategic plan?’ Because we set out very clearly to write a strategic plan that informed our key stakeholders, the majority of whom are our employees, that’s the audience. We didn’t set out to write a research document for the QAA.”
(College 22, interview)

This FEC submitted a strategy they had written recently, but before the pilot. Another FEC had used an existing development plan because (despite the fact that it was stressed by HEFCE that it was a draft) ‘the time scale did not allow for any consultation with the College Governing Body which would have been necessary if any deviation from approved strategic plan was intended’.

Many respondents commented that their feedback was requesting detail that they considered inappropriate in a strategy – this was a matter for underpinning implementation or action plans.

“That when the guidance is provided there is clarity on what the strategic content of the plan should be, as opposed to the level of detail which would be more appropriate in action plans or supporting documents. There will also need to be a list of what supporting documentation is required to support a strategy.”
(HEI leader Partnership A)

“There does seem to be some blurring between what is strategic and what is operational. In parts the feedback asks for operational detail in what is a strategic document. The inclusion of too much operational information leads to disengagement by such as Governors and conceivably employers or other externals who do not see this as relevant to them.

Furthermore, the environment in which colleges operate changes very rapidly which may impact on operational issues without major strategic impact.”
(College A2)

“I also felt the comments moved out of strategy and into implementation. This is always going to be a matter of debate but our expectation was we would each develop an implementation plan to underpin and realise the strategic objectives and these would work to SMART numerical targets, etc. In fact this work is underway for all of us.”
(HEI lead Partnership B)

“The segregation of strategic from operational or delivery plans needs further clarification. The level of detail for SMART targets also needs to be specified as current practice is for this information to be found in delivery plans and target setting activities.”
(College B2)

“The comment was made that we had not sufficiently described our quality assurance procedures in the draft strategy. I am not sure that this is part of a strategy document. We will consider this comment in planning the future direction of the strategy.”
(College 25)

Colleges suggested underpinning documents would address this.

“The outcome of this review is that there should, in our opinion, be much greater clarity given about the extent of detail which is required, and whether this detail can be provided in supporting documentation as appendices.”
(College 7)

One college (incorrectly) felt that the level of detail requested in the QAA appraisal suggested the appraiser must have worked to a set of criteria not available to the colleges.

However, some FECs felt requests for SMART targets were appropriate and would have included them with a longer timescale – not necessarily in a strategy but rather in an operational or implementation plan.

Guidance and exemplars

Some FECs suggested that a template for the strategy document, exemplars or good practice guidance, would be helpful. One – which had modelled its strategy on HEI examples and had attracted critical comment from the QAA appraiser – suggested taking the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) approach in its early days of providing documentation from a virtual college.

Other comments include.

“Guidance needs formalising and to be made as comprehensive as possible.”
(College 11)

“Guidelines on timescale and length of strategy would be useful.”
(College 14)

“Perhaps a template for future use – examples of good strategies to be available for someone who has never written a strategy. More specific requirements.”
(College 4)

“An example(s) of a completed HE in FE strategy would have been useful.”
(College 5)

“It would be useful if HEFCE could produce a good practice guide to the production of an HE strategy for FE colleges.”
(College 15)

There was a divide between respondents who found the guidance insufficient and wanted a template or example of good practice and those who found it too prescriptive.

“The partnership found the guidance helpful when drafting the strategy as it was reasonably clear how the strategy would be assessed by the QAA. However, while it helps to provide a structure for the strategy, it may be too restrictive for some colleges who will wish to adopt an alternative structure to fit with their own strategic planning models.”
(Partnership C)

“The guidance was fine, maybe a little open in places but from a personal perspective I found that to be beneficial.”
(College 14)

Another college’s briefly drew attention to diversity:

“Simply to reiterate that a ‘one size fits all’ approach is inappropriate.”
(College 17)

A final comment reflects the need to address a balance between diversity and clarity:

“The very significant difference between colleges must be catered for in any guidance but at the same time it must be made clear what is the balance of expectation regarding the strategy itself and how the strategy is to be implemented.”
(College 26)

Section seven: the case of partnerships

The QAA appraisers completed one report to the template for each partnership. In the two led by HEIs where the HEI had provided a framework strategy and the FECs had submitted individual strategies, the report referred to each component strategy by a coding system.

The regional teams had been advised:

If you appraise one of the partnership strategies, you may need to complete a report for the partnership's strategy and additionally an individual report for colleges in the partnership. Where colleges have all of their HE provision in the partnership it should be possible to complete just a single report for the whole partnership. Where a college has significant provision outside of the partnership you will need to do an individual report for that college taking account of the total HE provision in that college.

In the event, the two HEAs reporting on the HEI-led partnerships (each with six component strategies) took a different approach.

Table 1 summarises key elements with regard to partnership. As indicated in section three, partnerships had not been given specific guidance as to how to submit a strategy(ies), nor had it been determined in advance how the appraisal and feedback would be conducted. It was judged that the pilot process would identify issues.

Two of the partnerships (A and B) were formal and well established and, in both cases, the HEI lead submitted a strategy for the partnership which was accompanied by separate FEC strategies. The third partnership (C) was a recent partnership of six FECs with a LLN designed to promote a sub-regional strategy for HE in FECs.

Table 1 Summary of partnership submissions and response

	Partnership A	Partnership B	Partnership C
Format of submission	The 'overarching' partnership strategy and separate HE Strategies for FECs A 1 to 5 All representatives returned questionnaire	'Partnership strategy' for [partnership] submitted by the university and separate HE strategies for FECs B1 to 5 All representatives returned questionnaire	A HE strategy for [sub-region] supported by an LLN report on HE in the [sub-region] submitted on behalf of the partnership One questionnaire returned by the college lead.
Structure of submission	An overarching statement provided a framework: 'This overarching statement which prefaces the individual HE strategies of the college partners aims to articulate the broad strategic framework within which all partners have agreed to work.' And 'Each college partner has an institutional HE strategy which, amongst other things, builds on, complements and helps to deliver the broad strategic aims of the [partnership]. As autonomous institutions, the colleges have produced strategies that address the particularities of each college and its locality, as well as the wider scope of the federal aims... reflect a diversity of individual missions....'	The strategy for the partnership (HEI and partners) was introduced with the statement that ' [Partnership] has firm roots in a set of principles and values as well as a regularly reviewed mission and purpose'. The strategy set out a description of the partnership arrangements under seven headings with seven aims for the partnership. The separate college strategies followed the same template but addressed separate strategies, including relationships with other HEIs and NPHE.	The colleges formed a LLN sub-group, the HE in FE Working Group, 15 months previously. They are diverse in their scale of HE and funding streams. They planned that all should have separate HE strategic plans referring to the sub-regional strategy within a year (2009).
HEFCE feedback letter addressed to	The HEI lead (who sent in the collection of strategies)	The Vice-Chancellor	The Vice-Principal at the lead college
Letter copied to	No one	The HEI lead (who sent in the collection of strategies)	No one
Letter from	Higher Education Adviser	Higher Education Adviser	Regional Consultant

Follow up indicated in letter	You are welcome to address follow up comments to me, the Higher Education Adviser for the [university].'	'Please let me know if you have any questions or would like any further information.'	'You are welcome to address follow up comments to... the Higher Education Adviser for your institution.'
Wording of second paragraph	'We are confident that the [partnership] has taken a strategic view of its partners' HE provision...'	'We are confident that the [partnership] colleges have taken a strategic view of their HE provision...'	'We are confident that the college [sic] has taken a strategic view of its HE provision...'
Format of report from QAA (sections A and C to F)	Single report with references (A and C to F) to each strategy. Most sub-sections start 'Yes, to some extent' or 'Yes, to a limited extent.' This meant individual colleges have to deduce whether they have met the criterion by trawling through for specific references.	Single report with references (XX1 to 6) to the partnership document and the college strategies. Each sub-section starts with 'Yes.' Except one which is 'Yes, with reservations'. This is scholarly activity, which it notes is mainly limited to inclusion in the partnership strategy.	A single report referencing the two documents (as XXC1 and 2).
Format of report from regional team (section B)	Directed to individual colleges. Each section had a standard paragraph relating to the collectivity and a specific comment – with significant variation – for the college. The section on issues to be addressed was blank in all cases.	Single summary feedback: 'There is an overarching [partnership] strategy, as well as individual strategies from the colleges ... As these colleges are indirectly funded through [partnership], one template has been completed to cover the entire partnership.' There is a section on issues to be followed up which includes proof-reading before submission, an expression of disappointment that the strategies are not standard – 'Whilst recognising their autonomy and individual aspirations, it would be useful if the colleges could be more coherent in how they approach the development of the strategy. It seemed as if the general headings had been agreed but that it wasn't clear to all colleges what they were being asked to complete.'; a request for clearer future plans and for SMART targets.	A single report listing the six colleges. This consisted only of issues that need following up – the three other sections were missing. There were four bullet points including 'The strategy document is aspirational, but rather vague', 'Priorities are not SMART', 'Overuse of generalist terminology'.

Responses relating to partnerships

The HEI lead for Partnership B was concerned about the single feedback, both because it was sent only to the university without it being clear that the FECs had not been copied in, and in terms of the structure:

“I feel the individual effort of colleges was not properly reflected in the feedback mechanisms and it would have been more appropriate to evaluate the overarching strategy and the individual strategies separately.

While the guidance was helpful I felt that the criticisms failed to recognise that best efforts were made in the 6 weeks available and at times confused strategy with implementation.”
(HEI lead Partnership B)

A college member responded:

“Although a questionnaire was sent to each participating college, the original feedback went only to the main partner, i.e. the university. We have now received the feedback but it is in two sections with different formats.”
(College B2)

Partnership A had extracted items from the general and specific institution feedback for discussion at a partnership committee meeting in early July and the responses received from the colleges to the questionnaire reflected that discussion.

The lead raised the question of whether action should be in action plans rather than detailed in a strategy and this was echoed by the FEC responses. FECs found it difficult (evidence from both questionnaires and interview) to unpick the feedback from QAA relating to their own strategy (the regional HEA had given individual feedback to FECs in Partnership A).

“The colleges in [Partnership A] are very diverse and their response to working collaboratively reflects this. This is a matter for partnerships to consider internally, i.e. to what extent to determine a template for the individual college strategies or, alternatively, to let colleges write ‘a document for the college referring to the partnerships at the relevant points but clearly setting out the character of the provision for our own institution’.”
(College A3)

The lead for Partnership C responded to the questionnaires on behalf of all the partners. As noted above, the regional team report consisted of only the issues section. Not surprisingly, the comment was:

“In comparison to the guidance from QAA, the HEFCE regional team’s feedback was minimal. It didn’t seem to take account that it was a partnership strategy, in particular the complexities and sensitivities required for six colleges to agree a strategy within such a short time period. The strategy was deliberately written in general terms – it is a strategy and will therefore be used to guide future work, both within individual colleges and as a partnership.”
(College lead Partnership C)

The format of the feedback to partnerships was problematic for colleges.

“... it would have been better to have done them [the appraisal reports] separately and then had a separate one for the [partnership], rather than mixing it all together which just makes it difficult for me.”
(College A2, interview)

“Although most colleges’ HE provision exists within the context of a partnership of some sort... it was quite difficult to write a strategy consistent with the [partnership] strategy but retain the individuality. I would have preferred to write a document for the college referring to the partnerships at the relevant points but clearly setting the character of the provision out for our own institution.”
(College A3)

These three submissions were from partnerships but other colleges approached the question of consultation in preparation of strategies differently. Some consulted, others would have done so in a longer time scale and others do not see this as a prerequisite of preparation of a college strategy, particularly where there are multiple partnerships.

“The guidance and criteria are fine but we agree with comments made in the consultation that partner HEIs do not consult with FECs in respect of their strategies and we would not wish to consult with them, although of course, we would share the final version with them.”
(College 17)

“There is a need to understand the different environment in which colleges operate and the differing constraints and opportunities that exist for HE in FECs. There is also the need to be aware of the competition/collaboration dilemma faced by most FECs when trying to develop and grow their HE to widen access and provide locally accessible HE.”
(College 27)

A significant issue is presented by FECs which have validation and funding relationships with more than one HEI. This was raised by the regional teams and was evident in questionnaire and interview responses from both FECs submitting individual strategies and those in partnerships. This focuses attention on the ownership of a college’s strategy and the college’s level of autonomy in determining its strategy and, thus, the extent to which that strategy can be appraised independently of the strategy of the HEI(s), and vice versa.

Section eight: themes and issues

A summary of the themes and issues identified in the evaluation of the pilot process was provided in a briefing note to HEFCE officers in August 2008. Based on preliminary findings, the briefing was designed to inform the advice from officers to the HEFCE Board about the future implementation of a requirement for FECs to submit strategies for their HE provision and, in the case of the full report here, to support that process.

The following themes and issues have been identified and are offered to support development and implementation of an integrated, consistent and robust process.

Participation and preparation

Most FECs participated in the pilot in order to support the production of a HE strategy or in order to test or refine an existing strategy. The partnerships wished to develop or to formalise a framework and consistent approach.

Overall, FECs were positive about and benefited from participation in the pilot.

FECs reported that production or revision of a strategy encouraged constructive evaluation of their HE provision and its strategic direction and development. The process of internal (sometimes external) consultation and approval of the strategy had both clarified the processes and procedures related to HE and raised its profile within the college. The in-depth interview data indicated how useful the process had been, in particular for managers new to a strategic role and for FECs where a strategic re-evaluation took place.

FECs wished to take the opportunity to receive feedback on their draft strategies and most reported that feedback was clear and helpful, although a smaller number found it comprehensive. Caveats were expressed, many reflecting the separation of elements of the appraisal and feedback.

Appraisal and feedback

The evaluation indicated that the division of labour between QAA and HEFCE in the appraisal process and, most significantly, the separate reporting of their judgements at the feedback stage, created difficulties for both the appraisal teams and for FECs in receiving feedback. There were, in most cases, inconsistencies and unevenness evident in the two reports.

The design of the appraisal process required the QAA team to make desk-based judgements on the basis of 'internal' evidence while the HEFCE regional teams were directed to make judgements based on their knowledge of activities on the ground and HEFCE policy. In not a few cases, these dual purposes and procedures generated differences in judgement, as well as variations in content and style, so making it difficult to ensure a consistent and cohesive approach.

Furthermore, in many cases, the regional officers were not familiar with the provision of the colleges concerned, particularly where a college was fully or partially indirectly funded. As a result, a lower level of consistency was evident among section B reports compared to reports on the other criteria for appraisal.

The system of appraisal did not enable a test of a strategy against 'external' evidence in order to establish the completeness, appropriateness and reliability of the evidence

and claims made in a submission, for instance with regard to collaboration, growth or validation arrangements.

The evaluation suggested that, if the model of appraisal adopted in the pilot was to be implemented for all college strategies, then a greater level of co-ordination was required to demonstrate that the process is owned by HEFCE. At the same time, significant additional resources would need to be committed to ensure that the system for appraisal would be able to achieve the alignment, consistency and robustness sought for the scheme.

Guidance

Respondents in questionnaires and interviews indicated that more detailed guidance would be helpful both with regard to the structure and content of a strategy and on the criteria to be applied in any appraisal. Specifically, they would hope for guidance with respect to:

- the requirement for a strategy, a strategic plan, an operational/business/implementation plan
- content
- length and format
- use of supporting documentation.

Scrutiny of the draft strategies and comments from appraisers indicate that a section covering the current volume and range of provision (including prescribed and non-prescribed HE) would provide a context for readers.

Purpose

HEFCE policy for HE in FECs, as expressed in 2006/48, is to seek a more strategic approach from FECs and their HEI partners in order to enhance provision. While guidance on drafting strategies was made available to the pilots, FECs requested more detailed guidance on the scope of a strategy (see above) and the possible consequences for, in particular, current and future funded student numbers – both directly and indirectly funded.

Burden

While FECs overwhelmingly reported that the process of producing the strategy (or of modifying an existing strategy) was positive, they raised the issue of its relationship to other college strategies. FECs made a distinction between a strategy and operational or implementation plans; the latter providing underpinning evidence which might be included in other documentation.

Partnerships

The process of appraisal and feedback in respect of the three partnerships that submitted to the pilot indicated that attention needed to be given to guidance on the format of such submissions and to questions of ownership by FECs of their strategies.

The question of ownership and autonomy is not restricted to partnership submissions. All FECs (currently) have relationships with one or more HEIs whether they be for validation only or for validation and funding.

Process

During the pilot, only some FECs reported a formal signing-off of their strategy by college and corporation committees, but most reported they would expect to take the next version through such channels.

IQER

Several colleges reported a beneficial link between preparation for IQER and preparation of the strategy for the pilot and the evaluation suggested that an HE strategy could be part of the submission for IQER. In this case, the guidance for the appraisers would need to be adjusted for IQER reviewers.

Annex A: List of participating institutions

Thanks are due to all the representatives of the institutions who completed questionnaires and, in particular, to those who gave their time to be interviewed.

FECs HE strategy pilot 2007-08: institutions in the pilot

Barnet College
Blackpool and the Fylde College
Burnley College
Castle College Nottingham
City College Birmingham
City College Norwich
City College Plymouth
Dearne Valley College
Exeter College
Gateshead College
Greenwich Community College
Kidderminster College
Kingston Maurward College
Leeds College of Art and Design
Loughborough College
Mid-Kent College
Northbrook College
Orpington College
Ruskin College
Salford College
Wiltshire College
South Tyneside College
The Higher Education Business Partnership, Tees Valley
Trafford College
University of Hull Federation of Colleges
Wakefield College
West Herts College
West London Colleges
Wigan and Leigh College
Worcester College of Technology

Annex B: Draft guidance for the pilot submissions

Higher education in further education colleges: HEFCE guidance for FECs' HE strategy pilot

Introduction

1. This guidance outlines our expectation of what an HE strategy might address. It has been developed from our consultation circular in which we set out overarching statements about the nature of the provision we regarded as being strategic (HEFCE 2006/48, paragraphs 38 and 44). Some brief background information, including details of the criteria we used for selecting institutions for the pilot is provided in Annex A.

What should the strategy address?

2. The strategy should be for the next 3 years for the purpose of this pilot, that is, from 2008-09 to 2010-11.

3. It is not our intention to be overly prescriptive about the form in which the information is covered. However, we would expect colleges, when developing their strategy for HE, to demonstrate that they have taken into account the following factors.

- The rationale for the existing HE provision and for proposed future developments.
- We would expect the strategy to be consistent with the college's overall strategy, showing how the HE provision builds on strengths in FE, and therefore where there might be progression into and through HE.
- The management and governance processes that underpin the HE strategy, including the process of developing and implementing the strategy, and the mechanism for its approval.
- How the strategy relates to other HE provision locally and regionally, and how it will meet identifiable needs and in doing so how it will add value. This may follow from dialogue with other HE providers, and employers about the higher level learning applicable to their skill needs. It may also reflect consideration about attracting learners from groups under-represented in HE overall. We recognise the value of niche provision that attracts students from outside of the immediate region.
- How the provision might be enhanced by building on existing partnerships such as LLNs.

Annex C: Final guidance for pilot submissions

Higher education in further education colleges: HEFCE guidance for further education colleges’ higher education strategy pilot

Introduction

1. This guidance outlines the criteria for a higher education (HE) strategy we expect further education colleges (FECs) participating in our pilot process to address. It has been developed from our consultation on HE in FECs in which we set out an overarching view of the kind of provision we consider strategic (HEFCE 2006/48, paragraphs 38 and 44). Brief background information, including details of the criteria we used for selecting institutions for the pilot, is provided in Annex A. Strategy documents should be completed for **1 March 2008**.

What should the strategy address?

2. The strategy should be for the next three years, which, for this pilot, is 2008-09 to 2010-11. It is acceptable for a strategy to cover a shorter or longer period, where this accords with other planning schedules in the college and with the best time to work on the next stage.

3. It is not our intention to overly prescribe the form the strategy will take. However, we expect colleges to demonstrate that they have taken into account the following factors:

- a. The rationale for the existing HE provision, proposed future developments, and the lineages and discontinuities between current and future strategy. The strategy may be about growth in certain areas, or a rationalisation of provision where growth was neither feasible nor desirable. It may address partnership arrangements – whether there are too many, insufficient, and whether they are inappropriate, or whether there is a need for more partnerships; the nature of partnerships; continuing professional development, scholarly activity, resourcing of staff, facilities, equipment and learning materials; curriculum development and relationships with employers. It is acceptable to have a strategy that concentrates on selected objectives rather than one that is all encompassing and wide-ranging.
- b. We expect the strategy to be consistent with the college’s overall strategy, showing how the HE provision builds on strengths in FE, and therefore where there might be progression into and through HE.
- c. The management and governance processes that underpin the HE strategy, including the process of developing and implementing the strategy, and the mechanism for its approval.

Annex D: Draft appraisal criteria for pilot strategies

Further education colleges

Criteria for a higher education strategy

A further education college (FEC) offering higher education directly or indirectly funded by HEFCE should have a strategy for higher education that meets the following criteria. In particular an FEC must be able to show broad strategic expression (criterion A), have regard to regional, local and, where appropriate, national priorities (criterion B), have a policy for the sound strategic management of HE (criterion C), cite policy for the effectiveness of the assurance standards and quality in arrangements for which it has responsibility (criterion D), and indicate policies for ensuring the effectiveness of academic staff in HE and excellence of the HE student experience (criterion E).

A. Overview

- Does the HE strategy record its higher education mission, aims and objectives?

B. Regional, local and, where appropriate, national priorities

- Does the HE strategy record the priorities it intends to address?
- Does the HE strategy meet identifiable needs locally, regionally and/or, if appropriate, nationally?
- Does the HE strategy add value in respect of addressing local and regional priorities, and, if relevant, niche provision.
- Are there any issues that need following up?

C. Strategic Management of HE

- Does the FEC have a clear strategy for the development of its HE, which is consistent with its overall institutional strategy?
- Does the FEC have an HE strategy that aims to provide for the development of higher level skills?
- Does the FEC have an HE strategy that provides for close and direct responsiveness to employers?

Annex E: Final appraisal criteria for pilot strategies

Draft criteria: appraisal of a higher education strategy

This document sets out the appraisal criteria for the higher education (HE) strategy of further education colleges (FECs) participating in our pilot process. The criteria have been devised to align with the guidance for the pilot and the statements in paragraphs 37 and 44 of the consultation circular (HEFCE 2006/48). In the development of a strategy for HE, account should be taken of these documents, such that HE delivered in an FEC has a clear purpose in relation to the college's provision overall and accords with regional priorities and other provision locally and regionally.

A further education college offering higher education directly or indirectly funded by HEFCE should have a strategy for higher education that meets the following criteria.

A. Overview

- Does the HE strategy set out aims, objectives, and a rationale for current provision and intended developments?

B. Regional, local and, where appropriate, national priorities

- Does the HE strategy record the priorities it intends to address?
- Does the HE strategy meet identifiable needs locally, regionally and, if appropriate, nationally?
- Does the HE strategy add value in respect of addressing local and regional priorities, and, if relevant, niche provision?
- Are there any issues that need following up?

C. Strategic management of HE

The following questions will be considered in relation to the focus placed on individual aspects in the overview of the HE strategy (where something is not highlighted in strategic development for a sound reason this will be reflected in the appraisal).

- Does the FEC have a clear strategy for the development of its HE, which is consistent with its overall institutional strategy?
- Has the HE strategy given consideration to the development of higher level skills?

Annex F: Template for report

Name of college

Report 2007-08

References:

A. Overview

- A1. Does the HE strategy set out aims, objectives, and a rationale for current provision and intended developments?

B. Regional, local and where appropriate national priorities

- B1 Does the HE strategy record the priorities it intends to address?
- B2 Does the HE strategy meet identifiable needs locally, regionally and, if appropriate nationally?
- B3 Does the HE strategy add value in respect of addressing local and regional priorities and, if relevant, niche provision?
- B4 Are there any issues that need following up?

C. Strategic Management of HE

The following questions will be considered in relation to the focus placed on individual aspects in the overview of the HE strategy e.g. where something is not highlighted in strategic development for a sound reason this will be reflected in the appraisal made.

- C1. Does the FEC have a clear strategy for the development of its HE, which is consistent with its overall institutional strategy?
- C2. Has the HE strategy given consideration to the development of higher level skills?
- C3. Does the FEC have a strategy that provides for close and direct responsiveness to employers in relation to provision of higher level skills and employability?
- C4. Does the HE strategy address flexibility in provision including work-based learning?
- C5. Does the HE strategy have provision for attracting learners who will be seeking progression opportunities from within their FE programmes?

Annex G: Questionnaire 1



Confidential

QUESTIONNAIRE ON PARTICIPATION IN THE HEFCE PILOT OF HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGIES IN FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES

Please could you complete a single questionnaire for your college or partnership and return it to Karen Kitchen at the University of Sheffield by 20 March 2008 K.Kitchen@sheffield.ac.uk

Please could you give your:

Name

Institutional role

Institution

Date of completion of the questionnaire

A. Participation in the pilot

On 12 October 2007, David Eastwood wrote to all Heads of HEFCE-funded HEIs and Heads of FECs directly or indirectly funded by HEFCE (circular letter number 27/2007) to inform the Vice-Chancellors and Principals how HEFCE intends to implement its policy for supporting higher education in further education colleges and to invite colleges – or groups of colleges with HEI partners - to express an interest (by 12 November 2007) in participating in piloting the process HEFCE is developing for colleges' higher education strategies.

1. Please could you briefly describe the process by which the decision was made, and by whom, to express an interest in participating in the pilot.

2. What was the main reason(s) for your college or partnership wishing to participate?

B. Existing HE strategies

3. Did your college previously have an HE strategy document (that was separate from an overall college strategic plan)? If you are responding on behalf of a partnership, was there a formal strategy for the partnership?

Yes [] No []

4. If yes, did it include both prescribed (HEFCE funded) and non-prescribed (LSC funded) HE?

Yes [] No []

C. HEFCE briefing sessions

When colleges and partnerships were invited to participate in the pilot process (in November 2007), they were sent a copy of the guidance for the pilot, setting out HEFCE's expectations of what an HE strategy might usefully address. Additionally, they were invited to send two representatives from each participating college and one from partner HEIs to one of two developmental workshops (15 January in Leeds and 18 January in London).

At the development sessions, presentations were made by HEFCE and by the HE Academy; workshops discussed issues (workshop 1 focusing on developing the strategies and the guidance and workshop 2 on the criteria for appraisal) and formulated questions to put to a Panel of representatives from HEFCE, the HE Academy and the QAA.

5. Did your representatives find the events useful? Specifically:

Did they add to your awareness of HEFCE policy on HE in FE?

Yes, significantly [] Yes, to some extent [] No []

Did they help to clarify what was expected of the HE strategies to be developed in the pilots?

Yes, significantly [] Yes, to some extent [] No []

Did they help to clarify what you would need to do to develop a strategy, taking account of the draft guidance (which had been circulated)?

Yes, significantly [] Yes, to some extent [] No []

Were the criteria for appraising the strategies transparent and helpful? Was it clear how – and by whom – they would be applied?

Yes [] No []

Did the presentation by the Higher Education Academy add to your knowledge of its work in this area and indicate resources that might support the development and implementation of an HE strategy?

Yes [] No []

D. Guidance

After the sessions on 15th and 18th January, the Guidance and the Criteria were revised and sent to participants.

6. Did the revisions make the documents clear and helpful?

Yes [] No []

7. Did the guidance provide a framework to support production of your strategy?

Yes [] No []

E. Production of the strategy

8. Could you briefly outline the process of producing the strategy.

- Who drafted the strategy?

- Was it signed off before submission to HEFCE?

- Was it developed in partnership with a validating and/or funding HEI and, if so, how?

F. Evaluation of the process of producing the strategy

9. Did you find the process of drafting the strategy useful? Please could you comment briefly on the main positive and/or negative aspects of producing (or revising) your strategy.

G. Documentation

10. In drafting your strategy, did you draw on the following documents?

HEFCE 2006/48 – *Higher education in further education colleges: consultation on HEFCE policy*

Yes [] No []

HEFCE Circular Letter 27/2007 – *Higher education in further education colleges: implementation of HEFCE policy*

Yes [] No []

What additional, if any, materials did you draw on? Were these helpful and, if so, how?

H. Support materials

The HEFCE Good Practice Guides:

2003/15 – *Supporting higher education in further education colleges: a guide for tutors and lecturers*

2003/16 – *Supporting higher education in further education colleges: policy, practice and prospects*

are being revised in order to support the HEFCE policy for HE in FECs.

11. Are you familiar with the guides?

Yes []

No []

If you are familiar with them, do you have any suggestions for sections to be included in the contents in order to support the development of HE strategies in FECs?

Thank you for completing the questionnaire

Annex H: Questionnaire 2



Confidential

QUESTIONNAIRE ON PARTICIPATION IN THE HEFCE PILOT OF HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGIES IN FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES

*Please could you complete this second questionnaire regarding your experience of participation in the Pilot and return it to the project administrator at the University of Sheffield by **Monday 7 July 2008**. Please return by email to:*

K.Kitchen@sheffield.ac.uk

Please could you confirm your:

Name

Institutional role

Institution

Date of completion of the questionnaire

A. Completion of the strategy

Previously, we asked you whether you had found the process of completing the strategy useful and to comment on the main positive and/or negative aspects of producing (or revising) your strategy. Since then, you will have had an opportunity to further consult on and/or to develop the strategy within your College.

1. Do you have any additional comments to make in the light of this?

B, Feedback from HEFCE

You will be receiving feedback from HEFCE, based on the comments of the QAA appraisers and HEFCE Regional Advisers this week (week beginning 23 June 2008). Please could you comment on the feedback with regard to each of the six sections in the feedback (here questions 2 to 7).

2. Overview (from QAA appraisers)

Was this:

Clear?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>
Comprehensive and sufficient?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>
Helpful, providing guidance which will support further work on your strategy?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>

Please make any comment on this:

3. Regional, local and, where appropriate, national priorities (from Regional teams)

Was this:

Clear?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>
Comprehensive and sufficient?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>
Helpful, providing guidance which will support further work on your strategy?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>

Please make any comment on this:

4. Strategic management of HE (from QAA appraisers)

Was this:

Clear?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>
Comprehensive and sufficient?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>
Helpful, providing guidance which will support further work on your strategy?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>

Please make any comment on this:

5. Academic standards and quality assurance in HE (from QAA appraisers)

Was this:

Clear?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>
Comprehensive and sufficient?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>
Helpful, providing guidance which will support further work on your strategy?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>

Please make any comment on this:

6. Effectiveness of academic staff in HE (from QAA appraisers)

Was this:

Clear?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>
Comprehensive and sufficient?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>
Helpful, providing guidance which will support further work on your strategy?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>

Please make any comment on this:

7. The student experience (from QAA appraisers)

Was this:

Clear?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>
Comprehensive and sufficient?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>
Helpful, providing guidance which will support further work on your strategy?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	no <input type="checkbox"/>

Please make any comment on this:

Do you have any further comments on your future plans?

Your comments on the pilot

In relation to your overall experience of the pilot, do you have anything you wish to draw to our attention as evaluators?

15. Issues which might inform the HEFCE policy for HE in FE (policy as set out in Higher education in further education colleges (2006/48)?

16. The process and guidance for FECs producing HE strategies. (You may wish to comment on the clarity of the guidance and the criteria by which the draft policies were appraised; the process of production, including relationships with partner HEIs.)

Thank you for completing the questionnaire

List of abbreviations

ELQ	Equivalent or lower qualification
FD	Foundation degree
FE	Further education
FEC	Further education college
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
FHEQ	Framework for Higher Education Qualifications
FTE	Full-time equivalent
HE	Higher education
HEA	Higher Education Adviser
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher education institution
HNC	Higher National Certificate
HND	Higher National Diploma
IQER	Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review
LLN	Lifelong Learning Network
LSC	Learning and Skills Funding Council
NPHE	Non-prescribed higher education
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency