Introduction

Sixth form colleges provide high-quality academic education to 16 to 18-year-olds enabling them to progress to university or higher level vocational education. They prepare students with valuable skills for the workplace, helping to develop their career opportunities and strengthen the local, regional and national economy.

There are 92 sixth form colleges in England. The number has reduced from 120 since incorporation in 1993. However sixth form colleges continue to make a major contribution to further education and hold a special place in communities across the country. There are many common features to these colleges but it is also an increasingly diverse group in terms of history, size and place in the post-16 landscape. The first sixth form college, Luton, was opened in 1966 whilst Lowestoft was opened only in 2011. Many are incredibly successful academic institutions with excellent A Level results and outstanding progression to top universities. Others also offer a rich mix of applied learning as well as academic courses.

There are many features of what sixth form colleges do that have been consistent such as strong pastoral care and breadth of course choice. However the degree of innovation should not be underestimated. Many sixth form colleges have embraced change, grown, diversified and entrenched excellence. The case studies here demonstrate outstanding leadership within the post incorporation framework in which they operate. There are of course obstacles facing sixth form colleges, not least the compounding of funding cuts and perverse taxation. However the case studies demonstrate a willingness to innovate, using the autonomy our colleges have experienced since incorporation. Three of the case studies are examples of sixth form colleges opening new institutions or combining with other institutions. These leaders and their teams have sometimes pushed the regulatory framework to its limit but have been successful. However the leadership shown in these examples can also be seen in the successful diversification of provision in many other sixth form colleges. This applies in areas such as the delivery of higher education, international students and training.

What do we learn from these case studies about leadership and innovation?

All the leaders have taken time to analyse their environment and understand their own institution and emerging opportunities. They appear to have changed the way of looking at barriers facing their college and created fresh thinking. They are all courageous leaders, taking up initiatives and seeing them through to the end. They have done this at the same time as keeping their core business on track. This includes making the right investments in people and specialist resources.

These innovators can identify, exploit and profit from opportunity. However it is not just about individual leaders. They can also foster a commitment from their teams to embrace innovation. It is clear that even more success comes when a range of people in these colleges converge around the ideas of innovation.
Thinking outside the box

In September 2017, New College Pontefract will open the doors to its free school – New College Doncaster.

The journey for creating a new institution for 500 students began in January 2014 for New College Pontefract. They reviewed the post-16 provision for the area and found there was a need for alternatives. They found that there was student demand for a new institution.

Effective planning was crucial to the success of this project. They gathered data, created a vision, produced staffing, curriculum and financial plans and developed a governance model. They formed a multi-academy trust to govern the free school and enlisted potential governors. As a result of this work, the college’s application was accepted without recommendation. This has not only allowed them to put the processes in place to create a new institution, but also reflect on the existing college and the way it is run.

At the same time, the college was not prepared for some of the hostile reactions it received, despite having strong evidence about the need for alternative provision. The college changed this into a positive by making themselves very clear on the mission – the needs of the students in the local area.

We recognised the benefits of sharing resources across two colleges and the opportunities for creating a dynamic learning community. We felt confident that our vision was deliverable. In three years, we have reversed the declining performance of the college and taken it to outstanding. So what next? We are preparing our next application for a further free school to sit alongside New College Doncaster in the multi-academy trust. To us, it is not the strongest species, but the most adaptable which will survive.
One community, three colleges

Christ the King Sixth Form College was established in 1992 in Lewisham, South East London. Over the last six years, the college has worked with others to create a collegiate, bringing together three colleges to establish an education community in the area. This started with St Mary’s, in Sidcup in 2009 and Aquinas, in Brockley in 2013.

Prior to being part of the collegiate, the Sidcup and Brockley colleges needed support as numbers were low and in decline, examination outcomes were poor and the curriculum lacked coherence. They were former 16-19 schools, set up under schools condition. Therefore, they had to go through a legally-binding statutory school closure process, before the expansion of the college onto that site, through a goodwill process.

The creation of a collegiate brought obstacles for the Christ the King Sixth Form College. The need to improve the quality of teaching and learning, professionalising the workforces, developing strong leadership and implementing robust systems were crucial to the success of the project. Complex staff transfer processes were successfully delivered, whilst centralising key services such as IT, admissions, finance, estates, personnel and professional development and partnerships.

Across the collegiate, a significant number of students come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Despite this success rates are high and large numbers of student progress to university each year. The collegiate recognises, however, that more can be done to ensure that whatever they do is to the highest level.

In having to be explicit about who we were and what was important to us, we learned much about ourselves. Over time, we have found that the ways of working introduced in the new colleges were often shaped and honed and improved versions emerged. We have now created a vision for who we are as a three site college, ensuring our mission and ethos remain at the core of our work.
Partnering for progress

Carmel College is a Catholic sixth form college in St Helen’s, Merseyside, that welcomes students of all faiths and backgrounds. In 2014, the college made a decision to build a more strategic focus on strengthening its links with schools in the local community and the wider Archdiocese.

Together with the local authority, the college set out a programme of collaboration which aimed to work with local partners to promote the opportunities available. This included:

› The Raising Aspirations programme for year 10 school pupils, which began in 2014-15, with a full day event taking place in June 2015. This saw each local school send pupils to take part in English and maths sessions at the college.
› A conference, which focused on literacy across the curriculum, held in June 2015. Here staff from school and colleges across the North West came together to consider new approaches to increasing literacy levels.
› A staff development programme, organised by the college, which focused on increasing the resilience of staff and, in turn, fostering more resilience in students.
› The creation of activity days for year 10 and 11 school pupils, concentrating on areas such as Spanish, French, religious education and maths. These aimed to engage students and raise their aspirations before making their options for post-16 education.
Leaving no student behind

Rochdale Sixth Form College opened in September 2010. The area had traditionally seen low rates or progression and the college faced the challenge of convincing local people that a first-class academic institution specialising in A Level education could be established.

Since its creation, the college has been graded outstanding by Ofsted and topped the Department for Education league tables for two consecutive years for A Level progress. To achieve this, the college has set up precise tracking, powering intervention and has an unstinting belief in the ability of its students. The staff focus on lessons that ensure every student makes progress in an environment where pace and active participation are non-negotiables.

The college uses a one-to-one approach with its students as a central feature to help build and nurture them. Only seven other sixth form colleges have less qualified students and Rochdale works in a community where the largest partner school is in the 10th most deprived ward in the country. The college staff understand the challenges of financial poverty and poverty of aspiration. The style of teaching and learning has ensured that these are no barrier to achievement.

There is no doubt that it has been a tough journey to build a college, create an ethos and challenge preconceived ideas and low expectations. The college has helped its students be able to grasp greater life chances, and the value and impact of this cannot be underestimated.

We have tried to keep a simple mantra of high expectations, an exclusive focus on individual one-to-one work in and out of the classroom and a relentless focus on the core business of teaching and learning. We have processes that ensure no student gets left behind.
A Chair’s Tale

In 2002 Blackpool Sixth Form College was recovering from a leadership crisis. A requires improvement rating from Ofsted was deemed to be satisfactory by its governing body, who tended to micromanage, rather than consider the strategic vision of the college.

John Boyle took over as Chair of Governors in 2003 and along with the newly appointed principal carried out a strategic review of the college. They examined all aspects of the market place, curriculum, estate and leadership and found the college offered traditional A Levels with little reference to the needs of students and the community. The governing body also reviewed itself to ensure that the necessary skills were in place to govern effectively. They recruited business owners, senior managers, accountants, community and charitable workers who had strategic vision and challenge college managers.

As a result they developed a new brand for the college, with strategic plans to set targets to change the curriculum, improve teaching and learning and remould management. They introduced a unique combined BTEC/A Level offer of over 50 subjects and managed their finances to complete a cohesive, £30 million estate redevelopment.

The college is now graded outstanding by Ofsted, with governance as excellent. It has a new estate, student numbers up by 50%, the best-ever exam results and higher education entry levels a strong brand and a national reputation for excellence, leadership and innovation.

What did we learn? To turn threats into opportunities, be innovative and unconstrained by the momentum and practices of the past and be business like. We are now outward looking and collaborative and the leader in the local educational landscape – by putting the students first.
Sixth Form Colleges in England

Alton
Aquinas
Ashton
Barrow-in-Furness
Barton Peveril
Beaulieu
Billingham
Birkenhead
Blackpool
Bolton
Brighton, Hove and Sussex
Cadmury
Cardinal Newman
Carmel
Cheddle and Marple
Christ the King
Cirencester
City of Stoke-on-Trent
The College of Richard Collyer in Horsham
Coulton
East Norfolk
Esher
Franklin
Gateway
Godalming
Greenhead
Hartppool
Havant
Havering
Henley
Hereford
Hills Road
Holy Cross
Huddersfield New
Ickenham
John Leggott
John Ruskin
Joseph Chamberlain
King Edward VI College, Nuneaton
King Edward VI College, Stourbridge
King George V
Leyton
Long Road
Longley Park
Loreto
Lowestoft
Luton
New College, Pontefract
New College, Telford
Nuneaton
Notre Dame Catholic
Oldham
Paiyer's
Paston
Peter Symonds'
Portsmouth
Priestley
Princ Purglove
Queen Elizabeth
Queen Mary's
Regent
Regis
Richard Huish
Richard Taunton
Rochdale
Scarborough
Shrewsbury
Sir George Monoux
Sir John Deane's
Stoke House (Ely)
Cleddar
Farnborough
Sollersh
St Brendan's
St Charles Catholic
St Dominic's
St Francis Xavier
St John Rigby
St Mary's College, Blackburn
St Vincent
Stockton
Strdles
Thomas Rotherham
Voronel
Wilberforce
Winstanley
Woking
Woodhouse
Worcester
Wyggeston and Queen Elizabeth I
Wyke
Xaverian
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