



ASSOCIATION
OF COLLEGES

Strategic College Improvement Fund (SCIF)

**Association of Colleges (AoC) commentary following the
process evaluation**

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Context

The Strategic College Improvement Fund (SCIF) is a Department for Education (DfE) funded peer support improvement programme. It involves an applicant college which has been judged by Ofsted as 'requires improvement' (grade 3) or inadequate (grade 4), to work in partnership with a higher performing partner college to bring about quality improvement.

Fourteen applicant colleges have received SCIF funding in the pilot; six projects started in January 2018, and a further eight in the second wave in March/April 2018 with the main roll-out from June 2018. The total number of colleges now participating is fifty. The DfE commissioned CooperGibson Research to conduct a process evaluation to review pilot SCIF processes, identify lessons learned and the progress made by participating colleges and to help them develop appropriate performance indicators and evaluations. The research involved visits and interviews with applicant and partner colleges.

This AoC commentary is being published at the same time as the process evaluation to offer a sector view of the impact of SCIF and some suggestions for the future of college self-improvement peer networks.

Findings

All the applicant colleges felt that the SCIF was an excellent opportunity to accelerate improvement and all agreed that their involvement in SCIF had formalised and increased the intensity of partnership working. They felt that the SCIF self-improvement model encouraged more meaningful collaboration between colleges, and that SCIF funding had enhanced existing planning improvement activities and supported the delivery of new improvement activities. They also felt that a robust diagnostic was an important part of the application process.

SCIF-funded activity involved a wide range of college staff and different interventions. The SCIF has led to a culture change and a renewed commitment and confidence to implement change; for example, in performance management systems, lesson observation, staff training and employer engagement.

The most common areas of intervention identified were:

- Teaching, learning and assessment / teacher professional development.
- Student recruitment / retention / achievement and value-added.
- Performance management / use of management information.
- Leadership / senior management.
- English and mathematics.

- Curriculum design / management.
- Attendance and behaviour.
- Apprenticeships and work- placements.
- Student experience / support / voice.

The effectiveness of these activities is supported in the process evaluation by several powerful case studies.

Participants felt that SCIF-funded activity had been enhanced by strong working relationships between senior leaders in the applicant and partner colleges. These were linked to three key factors:

- Establishing a common understanding of the challenges faced.
- Continuing dialogue throughout the project.
- Sharing an understanding of the culture of each college.

Improvement activities included peer-to-peer support for middle leaders and for governors. In the most successful cases, feedback from visits and professional dialogue prompted frank and honest discussion of what needed to improve, including engaging senior leaders in supporting middle leaders to implement change, strengthening systems to support a college-wide strategy on teaching, learning and assessment, and improving accountability through rigorous performance management systems.

The SCIF model of peer-led self-improvement received overwhelming support from applicant colleges, partner colleges and wider stakeholders. They welcomed the focus on sector self-improvement and the encouragement of collaboration and sharing good practice and resources. They also valued the opportunity for flexibility of delivery, which allowed for emerging or changing priorities and maximised the value and benefit for improvement activities.

The factors identified as having underpinned successful SCIF partnerships included: two-way trust and transparency based on commitment and willingness to share, empathy and understanding between college teams, the opportunity to visit, observe and discuss practice and the 'critical friend' peer-to-peer approach to sharing ideas and practice.

Suggestions

The process evaluation offers some suggestions, which could inform the planning of future phases of the SCIF. These include:

- Improving the guidance and support available in the application process and allowing for a longer lead-in and delivery time.
- Developing a more formal process for identifying potential partner colleges.
- Providing common guidance on key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure baselines and affect (e.g. attendance, progress, retention, achievement).
- Developing ways to sustain improvement and share the learning from SCIF projects more widely in the sector.
- Consider widening the eligibility for SCIF funding.

AoC's view

The Association of Colleges has long advocated a large-scale peer-led sector improvement programme and welcomed the creation of the SCIF. We have supported applicant and partner colleges through every stage of the process and will encourage all remaining eligible colleges to bid in the third round of the SCIF.

Peer improvement programmes are a rich source of evidence about what works and can be of great value to our sector. Prime examples would be TeachToo and the Outstanding Teaching, Learning and Assessment (OTLA) programmes delivered by AoC and the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) working in partnership.

AoC will continue to work with the DfE and colleges to develop and review the SCIF and help to evaluate its impact. The process evaluation of February 2019 shows how powerful this model of improvement can be and it has already informed the development of the main phase of the SCIF, for example by enhancing the role of the quality improvement partner and the comprehensive support in preparing applications.

AoC would want all colleges to be able to benefit from the sharing of successful practice through a broader-based successor to the SCIF programme. Any college which identifies areas for improvement should be able to participate in a quality improvement peer network and the emerging learning should be shared widely in the sector.

The Association of Colleges would welcome the extension of Improvement funding to resource some capacity building for support and dissemination of good practice across the sector over a longer timescale. Relatively small continuing investment in sustainable quality improvement networks could help to permanently narrow performance gaps between colleges, and to deliver long-term sector-wide improvement.


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