

Illustrating the benefits of college international work through the British Council International Award

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Foreword

The Association of Colleges Beacon Awards celebrate the best and most innovative practice amongst UK further education (FE) colleges. The aim of the awards programme is to demonstrate and promote the far-reaching impact of colleges on their students and the communities they serve. The commended and winning case studies are used to increase understanding of colleges' contribution to educational skills policy and economic and social development.

With that in mind, we created the International Beacon Award to highlight the value of international work and widen participation in colleges by providing illustrations of best practice. At the British Council, we believe that all young people need international connections and skills in order to succeed and flourish in the world of work. This report investigated what we have learnt from shortlisted and winning colleges for the 2019 and 2020 awards, to understand what colleges can tell us about the impact of international work on the students and communities they serve.

In illustrating examples of international best practice from 2019 and 2020, we delve into a pre-pandemic world where inward and outward student mobility sat alongside virtual connections and innovations encouraging international exchange 'at home'. Yet the impact from 2021, following a year of swift and dramatic innovation, still tells many of the same stories. Connecting students and staff to the challenges and opportunities of working internationally can have profound and long-lasting impact in almost every aspect of college life: from improved motivation and confidence of individual students to curriculum innovation, job creation and inward investment.

In many cases, colleges with experience and expertise supporting some of their most vulnerable students have much to teach us about the importance of digital and at home connections in preparing students for a period of study or work overseas.

The process of establishing and assessing the International Beacon Award has also taught us a lot about the challenges of setting up sustainable international activities and telling the stories of success. This process of research has helped us to identify some common themes and also suggests ways in which the British Council and the Beacon Awards can engage more Colleges with international work and tell the stories of our success.

1. Introduction

This short research project examined evidence on the benefits of international work gathered from further education (FE) colleges across the United Kingdom. Using all the applications for the Beacon Awards for international work from 2018 and 2019, together with five interviews, this report uses a 'benefits matrix' to explore the nature of those benefits as reported by colleges.

The Association of Colleges (AoC) Beacon Awards celebrate the best and most innovative practice among UK further education colleges. The aim of the British Council International Award is to demonstrate the far-reaching impact of colleges on the students and communities they serve. The best kind of international work described by colleges brings benefits to students and staff, to the curriculum and to college reputation. This report examines these benefits and suggests ways in which an enhanced international mind-set among learners can be combined with curriculum development and imaginative partnerships to enhance the reputation of the further education sector.

The data gathered for this report suggests that the international work colleges do, now and in the future, contributes substantially to students' experience, the effectiveness of colleges, and to the UK economy. There is growing awareness from policy makers of the international export potential of the UK skills sector. The Government's March 2019 strategy on international education and its update in 2021, commits to enhancing the potential of the UK skills sector, notes a growing interest in the international student experience (HMG, 2019:31-2; HMG, 2021:17), and recognises the benefits of student mobility (AoC, 2018:#19). The All Party Parliamentary Group for International Students also argued in 2018 for greater inward mobility:

Our principal recommendation is that the Government should set an ambitious target to increase international student recruitment, backed up by a cross-departmental strategy to achieve it. (APPG, 2018:5)

The Beacon Awards have shown that colleges are 'transformational'; they can drive social mobility and enhance tolerance and wellbeing. At the same time colleges can help businesses improve productivity and economic growth more generally. Although a number of reports have touched on international work in the college sector, few have concentrated on the benefits to students, staff and institutions in the UK. The definition for international work covered by this report is:

Any kind of further or higher education programme, project or activity that involves staff and students working collaboratively with their peers outside of the UK, either through exchange or digital connections.

The AoC survey in 2020 identified at least 12 kinds of international activity, ranging from international students attending college courses, to major consultancy on college leadership to colleges in another country, and visits by UK students and staff to colleges in other countries. This range of activity was brought out by the Beacon Award, through the 37 applications submitted in 2018 and 2019 (AoC, 2018).

For most colleges the individual benefits to their students was the priority reason for international engagement, and changing students' lives was the common purpose. For their international students, this included acquiring better social capital, stronger language skills and university aspirations. For home students, there was evidence of greater self-confidence, self-esteem and employability skills; improved achievement, retention and progression; greater independence for students with disabilities; enhanced success in securing work experience and work placements. Colleges reported that students developed greater cultural awareness, enhanced motivation and '*new skills and qualities*'. It is '*life changing*' one college reported.

Benefits for staff included fresh insights into pedagogy and greater confidence to enhance teaching skills and curriculum development; greater abilities in leading professional development, and a renewed sense of purpose. It also reduced staff turnover, increased staff satisfaction, and student satisfaction with teaching.

Benefits to the college and its communities included more innovative curricula and collaborative work with other colleges; more dynamic opportunities with local employers and international connections for them; students returning to share ideas with the majority who have not travelled; and better apprenticeship placements. Communities benefit too. Through accommodation and local work experience placements for international students, communities reported an enhanced cultural awareness and pride for the local area, in addition to the economic benefits these services bring. There is also a 'widening participation' element: the

community impact of raising aspirations and achievement where students may never have travelled abroad before.

There are benefits to the UK economy and to colleges more widely: not just through enhanced reputation and vocational education and training internationally, but increased income from international students from grants and project funding, from consultancy and new business opportunities.

The report concludes with three recommendations. First, *in response to the UK international strategy* and policy interest, the British Council and Association of Colleges, together with partners, might develop an FE international strategy to include a focus on UK students and staff, as well as the already significant international work done by colleges which contributes to the UK economy. This would aim to increase the reputation of FE in the UK as suggested by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG, 2018:35) and the UK International Education Strategy (2021), and might involve a blueprint for college international work, encouragement of greater co-operative efforts between colleges on international matters¹, and further research on the development of international work in FE. It would also serve to develop and evidence the less tangible benefits of international work to staff and students in the UK.

Second, to *support colleges* considering the development of international work, it is suggested that partnership work and other opportunities are aimed at helping colleges to secure funding for international development work. Colleges may need some continuing assistance to develop and sustain international work in order to enhance staff professional development and student opportunities, together with methods of evaluating the work. This might follow from the International Education Strategy Update (HMG, 2021:17):

Supporting internationalisation, including opportunities for study and training abroad, helps us to create a new generation of internationally mobile people who can succeed in an increasingly global marketplace.

More support from development agencies, and better information in order to take advantage of opportunities beyond inbound student recruitment, have been recommended elsewhere (AoC, 2019:#20). Such a development may require colleges to record both qualitative data and some of the measurable benefits of international work in a systematic and evaluative way, to show impact on students, staff, local communities including employers, and the college reputation.

Third, to *enhance the Beacon Awards* it is suggested that colleges might be encouraged to record the impact of international work more carefully, as in (2) above. This would also assist colleges to apply more effectively for development work and grant funding. Convincing and measurable evidence of the impact on staff, students, the curriculum and colleges themselves would focus applicants on the purpose of the work, its value and quality. To attract more applicants, the Awards team might need to review the Award criteria, with assistance from previous Award winners, and offer support for applicants to make a stronger application.

The British Council and the Association of Colleges would like to thank the 37 colleges who contributed to this report by applying for the Beacon Award. In addition, some college leaders shared their views of the work through interviews. The evidence from colleges appears anonymously in the text because the Beacon Award applications are judged blind. The college contributions provided a rich variety of evidence: thank you all.

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2. The Beacon Awards

Established by and for colleges in 1996, the Association of Colleges (AoC) is a membership body and the national voice for Further Education, Sixth Form, tertiary and specialist colleges. The AoC Group includes the AoC Charitable Trust, a registered charity. The Beacon Awards are organised through the Association of Colleges Charitable Trust and aim to showcase best practice and innovation in colleges. The Awards are open to all colleges in the UK, whether in membership of the AoC or not.

The British Council is the UK's organisation for international educational and cultural relations. The British Council believes that all young people should benefit from regular and cumulative international experience and connections as part of their formal and non-formal learning. The British Council shares experience from policy and practice and continually develops the work through piloting different approaches to raise the profile and quality of skills development globally. The British Council's work on skills has brought together over 100 International Skills Partnerships and reached over 30 million people.

For 25 years the Beacon Awards have annually celebrated the best and most innovative practice among UK further education (FE) colleges. The Awards highlight excellence and help to share best practice across the sector. In 2018 and 2019 the British Council co-developed and sponsored a Beacon Award which became the *British Council International Award*. The criteria are listed in **Annex A**.

The 'International Beacon Award' identifies good practice in colleges in relation to international work. All further education colleges in the UK are eligible to apply including general FE, sixth form colleges, land-based colleges, those for art, design and performing arts, institutes for adult learning, and specialist colleges. Some 26 applications were received for the Award in 2018 and 11 applications in 2019 respectively. The British Council and the AoC commissioned this report to:

- highlight evidence presented in the Beacon Award applications of both the impact on individual staff and students, and the institutional impact of international work on the colleges themselves;
- identify where possible the characteristics of good models;
- find out what measures colleges could use to report on the benefits of international work, and
- seek ways of encouraging more colleges to embrace international connections.

The definition for international work covered by this report and the Award is:

Any kind of further or higher education programme, project or work that involves staff and students working collaboratively with their peers either inside or outside of the UK.

The Award criteria is set out in full in Appendix B but includes work where FE learners in the UK are encouraged to develop an international mind-set, particularly where they have suffered disadvantage or are an underrepresented group in a vocational area; collaborative work with overseas partners, especially where it improves the reputation and connections with other countries; and where international work benefits the wider organisation and community.

The first winner of the Award in 2019 was National Star College, and in 2020 Grimsby Institute of Further and Higher Education.

Although a number of reports have been written in the last five years about international work in FE colleges, very few identify the benefits of involvement to students, staff and institutions in the UK. There is much to celebrate in college international work and the range can be very wide. For example, one college's international work involved collaborating with an international charity and professional broadcasters to live stream music for ill and disabled children and adults in the UK, using students from business, health and social care, graphics and media studies (C8a²).

3. Research approach and rationale

This study is based on data included in 37 applications to the International Beacon Award over two years. In addition, five interviews were undertaken with colleges commended in 2018-19. A review of the literature was also undertaken. Almost all the colleges applying over two years appear somewhere in quotations in this report.

All college exemplars have been anonymised and quotations are given here anonymously. The data comes from written applications for the Award. The process of application was in three stages: a written initial summary submitted anonymously with a limited word count, a more detailed written application, and a third stage which involved assessor visits to colleges. These independent assessors judged the applications which were then moderated by one of two chief assessors. The proposals were then discussed by an independent panel.

The interviews with senior managers in Beacon-commended colleges were conducted by telephone using a set of guided questions. They were recorded. The interviewees had been responsible for the original application and received the questions in advance so that they could prepare should they wish (see Annex C).

As this report will highlight, activity varied between colleges and so did the focus – on staff, on students, on colleges in other countries. No common pattern emerged as a 'model' and the intention of the work can often be different from the outcomes. The methodology for considering the data in this report is based on the benefits matrix developed by Mackinnon, 2017.

'*Changing Lives*' (Mackinnon, 2017) looked at the benefits which internationalisation brings to colleges. Based on interviews with sector leaders, the researchers found six broad themes but report eight benefits:

- student benefit
- financial benefit – making a profit
- financial benefit – project funding
- staff benefit
- improving teaching and learning
- responding to local needs
- inclusion and diversity
- enhancing reputation.

(Mackinnon, 2017:21)

Mackinnon found the word ‘internationalisation’ problematic, hard to promote, lacked specificity, and that some of the benefits can be achieved in other ways. The purpose of international work in FE, it is suggested, has to be: *Changing students’ lives, broadening their horizons, or earning a margin to spend on other things...*

(Mackinnon, 2017:5)

All of Mackinnon’s benefits were identified in the Beacon applications, as listed here:

	Focus of benefit	How this is identified by the Beacon colleges
1	Students individually	Includes students who remain in the UK; those who travel abroad; those who travel to the UK
2	Colleges improving the ‘bottom line’ through fees and consultancy	Increasing income: often professional and strategic consultancy for overseas colleges, or international student fees
3	Colleges improving the ‘bottom line’ through international development projects, e.g. via British Council funding	Colleges increasing income and opportunity through project funding
4	Staff individually	Benefits for staff include professional or personal development
5	The curriculum and pedagogy	Developing better teaching and learning or a broader curriculum in UK colleges
6	Local employers	Benefit through companies responding to international work locally
7	Local communities	Impacting on inclusion and diversity in the UK; involvement of community organisations in international work; involvement of host families
8	Reputation of the UK	Enhancing our reputation in vocational education and training internationally; providing exemplars for policy makers.

Table 1: Benefits matrix as reported by college applications for the Beacon Awards

However, some of these categories are better seen as a continuum and there is evidence that the ‘benefits matrix’ does not cover the full range of everything colleges do, or their strategic intentions. For some, the *intention* of the work can be in more than one category. For example, in one college (C1a) there were regular reciprocal visits for students and staff (1;2); links with schools internationally (2;3); summer schools for younger international students (1;2;7); purpose-built hostel accommodation for overseas students (2); programmes for international students in the UK on discrete courses and in-filled (1;2;7;8); and enhanced provision for UK students to live and work abroad (1;8). Another college senior manager made it clear that the intention of the work was not income generation:

... that sometimes means we don’t go out and... make millions and millions off our international work. We make things feasible so we can actually deliver some impact...
(C9i)

For this report, five broad headings have been used in order to make the findings much clearer. They are: the benefits to students, to staff, to the curriculum, to local communities and employers, to the UK and FE college reputations.

4. The benefits of international work in FE

4.1 The benefit to students

Colleges reported many benefits experienced by students and in almost all interviews it is the benefit to students that colleges report on first. These were largely qualitative and related to vocational training or employability. However, some of the exemplars were powerful and life changing. As one college said:

These experiences have a huge impact on their [student] development and broadens their horizons when it comes to future career options. We have seen transformational results in students... who struggle while there but change and grow throughout and after the experience... huge benefits for participant students, many of whom have experienced life changing visits... (C11i)

Further, like many other Beacon applications, the same college identified individual student testimonies and biographies to illustrate the impact of these experiences:

D... was a motor vehicle student who went on an Erasmus+ exchange to our partner... in Germany in December 2016. During his placement... the employer identified his potential and offered him an apprenticeship. When he finished his course here at the College in June 2017, he moved to ...his apprenticeship [and] is still working and living in Germany (Motor Vehicle student, C11i)

Where colleges did use measures to report benefits, this was of a functional kind (for example: numbers involved, qualifications achieved, progression identified) and these were often partial or lacking trend data. Nevertheless, many of the benefits were impressive, and heartfelt:

The trip was a truly amazing experience... I have gained a lot of new skills and qualities that will help me in my future career path... (Health and Social Care student, 2018)

In Mackinnon's 'benefits matrix' he argues that benefits to students can be divided into the benefits experienced by international students who are taught in the UK; the value of 'internationalising' the curriculum for home students; the benefit to home students of student exchanges; the positive impact of institutional twinning on home students; the benefits experienced by home students from cultural activity or philanthropic work (Mackinnon, 2017:21). Examples of all these were identified in the Beacon Awards.

Colleges noted examples of benefits experienced by international students:

...this year 86% of international students received an offer from a Russell Group University (C10a)

Colleges also highlighted the wider benefit to home students involved in learning alongside international students too:

...the summer school allowed me to learn alongside 25 international students from Austria and Russia... This was a once-in-a-lifetime learning opportunity that will help my future construction career... (Construction student).

Some colleges suggested that home students improved on their results, aspirations and employability as a result of learning alongside international students:

Learners benefit from the extra dimension international visitors bring to the classroom, by gaining an added awareness of the key aspects of globalisation and developing their cross-cultural and interpersonal skills within an international framework. (C13a)

Colleges described how they recorded benefits and also the impact on their students, usually in qualitative ways. They mentioned increased confidence, self-esteem and satisfaction, enhanced options and aspirations, and offering role models:

...we ask for feedback from returning participants, we also ask for feedback from their parents, lecturers and where applicable from their work placement supervisors... Students have since acted as role models for individuals with similar needs and provide encouragement to others who may be less motivated to try and challenge their boundaries. (C26a)

In some of the colleges with a more embedded international approach, students were taking courses directly influenced by the international experiences of staff and students, a kind of *internationalising of the curriculum*³. There is a knock-on effect to more general student life too:

...the current president of the students' union is from Vietnam, with her executive committee including learners from Russia, Turkey, Moldova, Slovakia and Germany, which has significantly helped shape an international mind-set amongst their peers. (C6a)

Students also benefit from the reciprocity evident in student exchange programmes and institutional twinning. In one, entirely composed of students with disabilities:

...students from the UK and Greece work in teams within a range of social enterprises. Teaching and learning actively promotes collaboration and encourage learners to communicate and support each other...in a professional Bistro, learners work in pairs with the chef preparing food, whilst a job mentor carefully constructs tasks that allow the UK learners to support the Greek learners with their development of language... (C2a)

This college was not alone. Students with special educational needs and disabilities were a focus for international work in several colleges:

In 2017/18 we had... severely autistic and students with other severe learning disabilities and difficulties undertake life-changing international experiences in Finland, Germany and Sweden. (C16a)

Students gain a lot of benefit from cultural exchanges or getting involved in charitable or voluntary endeavour. In one largely rural college, for example, Chinese students shared their cultural heritage; maths, physics and biology 'olympiads' were held; and local schools joined in the college's annual lunar new-year celebrations (C6a). In another college, music students worked with Canadian professional broadcast staff to create a set of broadcasts for children in hospitals in the UK:

I enjoyed getting to do something that is not only industry relevant but also knowing that I am doing something that is helping others. It is such a gratifying feeling. I knew I was making people happy and making people feel better; it felt meaningful (C8a)

Finally, colleges were very clear that there are mutual benefits for students from different countries learning together:

Having international and UK students working side-by-side in lessons enhances classroom dynamics and broadens the cultural awareness of both staff and students.

International students offer different ideas and perspectives, and ...motivate local students to become more involved in activities and help them realise they could also have an opportunity to study or work abroad in the future. (C24a)

One significant finding is that, in spite of prompts, applicants did not often report measurable benefits such as improved student retention, achievement and employability. Where it was provided, this evidence was compelling. Measurement of benefits is explored in Section 5 and forms the basis of one of the recommendations in this report.

4.2 The benefit to staff

Some colleges make a significant impact on the professional development of staff in other countries:

A multi-national team will be delivering a specialist teacher education programme to Belgian teachers in October 2018... in Athens, Greece to identify innovative and imaginative ways of using assistive and enabling technology to support learners with disabilities... specialist teaching programmes in Antigua and Belgium... exchange placements for teachers through partnerships with special schools in Kenya, Nigeria... (C2a)

This is an important element to colleges' work but relatively unknown. Specialist teacher education goes beyond 'visits' and specifically aims to develop skills and knowledge on an international basis:

...drives an international strategy that involves partnerships across ten European and seven worldwide countries. Current work involves specialist teacher education, learner vocational skills development, inclusive education and assistive technology best practice. (C2a)

It is staff exchanges, though, which colleges have seen as most beneficial to their own staff, curriculum and organisational development:

...staff have gained fresh insight into pedagogy, and students have greatly improved their awareness of global issues (C4a)

This significant impact on staff was mentioned in terms of upskilling and institutional change:

... teaching staff... engineering, fashion and garment design, hospitality and supported learning staff.... In all cases... staff have reported significant personal and organisational impacts. "I've learned a lot about things I never considered, like the possibility of disabled people with Downs and other conditions working in hotels. ... "Disabled people do the same jobs, receive the same pay and there are not the challenges that we would have assumed before the visit" College Lecturer (C7a)

One college reported stronger staff motivation and better employer focus as a direct result of international staff visits:

"This journey allowed me to grow and now I'm itching to get started, implementing what I've learned about engaging with employers and the community into our own practices" (C12a)

and made clear that international opportunities are for **all** staff, just as opportunities are open to all students:

...skills trainers, employability coaches, administrators, managers, teachers, students, employers. We now see non-teaching staff with new confidence presenting to SMT and conferences. (C12a)

In many ways the benefits to staff have some similarity to the benefits for students – learning new skills, bringing back ideas and confidence – with staff gaining a much greater understanding of what is possible in their own teaching:

For many, international mobility is a life-changing experience. Staff undertaking mobility placements benefit from a deeper understanding of education in different international contexts. (C13a)

A few colleges presented evidence that staff retention is enhanced through their international work. Of significance is the move to ensure that international work has a strategic place in the college, built in and focused for staff, rather than an ‘optional extra’:

Staff share knowledge and contacts which give others the confidence to join applications for new funding. For many areas, international experiences are now built into Study Programme options rather than being an add-on with limited context. (C14a)

4.3 The benefit to the college curriculum

It is difficult to separate curriculum from staff development in college responses to the Beacon Awards. Sometimes colleges reported that they had altered the curriculum as a direct result of their international work. One, for example, found that international exchanges offered,

... a powerful medium for providing many of our students with an exciting and challenging opportunity to fulfil many of their course requirements.... bids could include opportunities for the accreditation of many aspects of the experience (C11a)

Nevertheless, illustrating the benefit to staff *capacity* as well as to curriculum development, one college provided a list of benefits to both:

- Collaborative development of business skills curriculum for mobile app developers with Belgian, UK, Italian and Spanish partners
- Two new bakery and patisserie courses offered following partnership in Spain
- Staff upskilling from Japanese partner has resulted in the introduction of a cross-curriculum Robotics competition with plans to include the other colleges and partners
- Staff upskilling from a Thai College in food engineering resulting in provision for the agri-food sector and an apprenticeship model for food engineers
- Our 12-stage Project Based Learning (PBL) process is based on Basque best practice, facilitating a College-wide approach to embedding PBL. PBL continuous professional development was delivered by Basque trainers and the College has subsequently delivered PBL training to three colleges. (C15a)

College international partnerships can add value to curriculum development. For example, in the field of engineering and additive manufacturing one college with eleven international partners co-developed a new ‘*futuristic curriculum*’:

... in the application of smart technologies and alternative fuels. This acted as the catalyst for inspiring a suite of novel curricula in Electric Vehicle awareness, operation and maintenance. (C18a)

Curriculum development occurs when staff return refreshed and with new ideas for their teaching sessions, or where students are influenced by both returning and visiting students. In one, following a college student and staff exchange to India:

...we had the big fashion show ... which involved fashion students and television production students, our events management students, our music students... they were all involved as the result of the India project because that fashion show was the India programme. So we've been able to extend the impact across a whole range of different departments, you know, even those who weren't going to India... (C7i)

One college linked their outstanding widening participation work with refugees to their international work with 70 partners. The college then developed an original training programme for college staff on migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and a pack on social inclusion for use with other students:

...it has empowered them and developed their capacity to engage and integrate within the wider community. It has increased personal awareness of the impact of inward migration and how to tackle racism. All resources developed through each project are freely accessible and available to all. ...we have developed a project website to host the training, materials and information relating to tackling racism and promote inclusion... (C43a)

Finally, one unusual project illustrates how colleges which work together over international borders can often 'internationalise' the curriculum in long-lasting ways. A UK and South African college worked together through project-based learning to develop a curriculum on leisure and tourism which was then developed with a cohort of level 2/3 students from each college and a group of staff. This 'interdisciplinary' curriculum involved business students developing the marketing; media students producing videos; tourism students learning to be tour guides and to produce travel packs:

Student activities included project participation, visiting employers, completing assignments, and showcasing work during study visits... 'As a lecturer with 23 year's teaching experience in further education... this project has without doubt been my highlight. It has been invaluable development both personally and professionally and one that will have an impact on my travel and tourism classroom teaching and planning for the duration of my career!' (C21a)

4.4 The benefit to local communities and employers

Colleges said that local communities benefit from their international work in three distinct ways. First, local companies and organisations benefit from being connected to businesses in other countries. Second, individual students have opportunities which can raise aspirations, often unanticipated. This 'widening participation' element was evident through Erasmus+ programmes, for example, and colleges reported enhanced aspirations in local communities. Third, some local communities have benefited from families hosting international students which can bring income, friendships and potential for international travel later. Some local businesses described how hosting international students had led to innovation and adoption of new practices. For example, local kindergartens hosting Japanese care students described how they had continued to implement some of the practices the students had introduced from the Japanese system.

Local employers benefit from working together with local colleges; one college said that international work had increased employer commitment, which had brought wider benefits to the college's work:

Since launching this project, the [college] now works with 50 per cent more employers. These play a key role in providing the following:

- Visiting speakers
- Technical demonstrations
- Work placements
- Role play activity
- Premises visits
- Masterclasses
- Practical resources donation
- Learning and technical conferences
- Sponsoring skills and trade show visits
- Access to apprenticeships

(C12a)

Some senior managers in FE have been invited on trade missions. Others have been encouraged by local MPs to get involved in international visits with local employers in order to secure opportunities for business, as well as technical and vocational education. All of this can add value to local stakeholders, like companies and schools:

Further outcomes from mobility and partnership projects include:

...collaborative development of business skills curriculum for mobile app developers with Belgian, UK, Italian and Spanish partners (C14a)

...a group of young Chinese summer school students at a local primary school where Mandarin is being taught ... an invitation to accompany a ... Government Cabinet Secretary to the Middle East to represent regional skills capabilities to a group of potential inward investors and the college's Chinese partners funding a senior member of the local council to accompany college staff to meet representatives of the Chinese District Government (C13a)

Student involvement in international work can lead to involvement in local community action. Once confidence has built up, new possibilities emerge:

...a recent Erasmus+ KA2 project ...brought together students of Health and Social Care to volunteer at a centre for people with memory loss and neurological conditions such as dementia and Alzheimer's. The ... project shared international approaches for carers and family to record, compile and share digital memories and has been adopted by local organisations across the partner countries. (C19a)

Widening participation increases aspirations and draws attention to what colleges can do to provide greater opportunities for individuals and communities. In 2018 the winner of the Beacon Award for international work focused solely on students with disabilities and learning difficulties. All their extensive international work related to inclusive practice, to SEND and to

professional development in relation to disabled students. Other colleges also focused on this group:

... students with learning needs carried out supported work placements with a vineyard in Chinon, France and next year a similar group will travel to Sweden (C14a)

Local communities can benefit from enlightened college international work, although it is sometimes not a straightforward journey:

... we work with the long established and largely underprivileged Somali community in our city. College senior management meet regularly with community leaders in order to support their learning. ... currently delivering a bespoke teacher training course to help more members of this community access teaching as a career... (C13a)

Schools and local colleges have developed Chinese and Mandarin Chinese cultural courses as a direct result of the development work carried out by FE colleges where Confucius Institutes are involved. In one college this was substantial:

...through the delivery of Mandarin Chinese training to 4,000 learners annually for the last 6 years...The College ... has extended its network to 60 schools to raise the aspirations of young people ... The learners range from primary school children to adult learners (D18a)

Seldom mentioned is the impact of colleges' international work on families. It is clear that a great many families support family members in their ambitions and international involvement, socially and financially. They also host staff and students from other countries which can result in friendships, financial benefit and enhanced commitment to the purpose of further education more widely:

Local homestay providers supplement our own accommodation, building links with and making a financial contribution to the local community. (C1a)

It is not just financial. Families and the community benefit from meeting students and staff from other countries:

...impact on the diversity of the college has been significant and long lasting, with the majority of international students staying with host families, which in turn has an impact on the wider community. (C10a)

4.5 The benefit to the UK and the profile of colleges

'We are proud of the reputation of our college' states one application for an Award. Reputation and contribution to the UK economy are important factors in this work and sometimes a significant motivation for college senior managers and their Boards. This makes an important contribution to the sector as a whole. One college said:

...our examination board for English as a foreign language ...has supported over 500,000 students worldwide. We ...support Government(s) in trade/investment/aid missions. A recent highlight is our pioneering Chinese culinary arts programme which was showcased by the Prime Minister at Downing Street.... (D28a)

Other colleges note the critical importance of the UK's reputation in enhancing vocational education and training internationally, and sometimes illustrate these benefits in terms of income:

Over the past 3-year period, [we] have secured cross-sectoral international projects worth a total value of €6 million that has enabled futuristic curriculum development, integration of exemplary teaching and learning, innovative youth engagement approaches and increased inclusion of disadvantaged groups... (C18a)

In several cases colleges were making a significant contribution to the development of further education and training in other countries:

Since 2013, our ...Programme has transformed colleges and polytechnics across India. ...we will have trained over 800 deans and principals from across the subcontinent, not only providing Leadership and Management skills, but facilitating highly impactful change projects that allow delegates to put their skills into practice... 94% of delegates successfully achieved a Level 5 qualification from the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) (D38a)

This particular college was keen to make clear its leadership development skills. Another college focused on its expertise in relation to asylum seekers, migrants and refugees, successfully stitching together grants to develop additional work:

£1M for a Big Lottery Transforming Learning Communities Project to support migrant community; £50,000 from the Health Promotion Agency for the VOICE project to support migrant communities; €5m in EU funding through the ...strategic partnership projects "Learning for Living" and "Learning for Living Together" which again support the integration of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees (D43a)

Other colleges had opened prestigious schools and colleges in India, China and the Middle East, awarding sought-after qualifications (D61a; C17a). This variety of activity indicates that colleges might best be encouraged to focus on their strengths rather than to follow a central policy steer. What might be required is encouragement, information and an understanding of ways they could achieve their strategic ambition. For example, one college is making a substantial contribution to the education of disabled young people worldwide:

We work with specialist organizations worldwide who work with young people with physical disabilities in order to share professional expertise, broaden learners' understanding and experience, raise awareness of disability within local communities and to champion disability rights in countries who are starting their equality journey. (C2a)

Impact for FE requires the oxygen of good communication strategies. One college aims in its international strategy to reach local people because raising the college profile this way indicates a richer curriculum for students locally:

Internally the project reached 1800 staff and 23,000 learners. Social media posts reached approximately 100K followers. Each mobility took a videographer with films scheduled for air on Estuary TV, broadcasting to a viewership close to 900,000 people across Lincolnshire and Humber in addition to our new Erasmus online channel. (C12a)

This illustrates the importance of a good communication strategy. It also demonstrates how measurable indicators can be encouraged and if developed consistently could provide a more compelling case for international work.

4.6 Summary of the benefits of international work in FE

To sum up, for most colleges the individual benefits to their *students* was the priority reason for international engagement and changing students' lives was the common purpose. For their international students, this included acquiring better social capital, stronger language skills and university aspirations. For home students there were snippets of evidence offered by colleges that international work brought,

- a greater self-confidence, self-esteem and the soft skills needed for employment/employability (88 per cent of students in one college; the average for all colleges reporting on this was 90 per cent)
- a more internationalised curriculum, i.e. greater depth and range of curriculum for students to experience
- improved achievement rates (students with mobilities 16 per cent above the rest of the cohort in hair/beauty in one college; 12 per cent above the rest of the cohort in another)
- improved retention (3 percentage points above the rest of the cohort in one college)
- more independence in relation to students with disabilities
- greater success in securing work experience/work placements
- better progression (e.g. securing US financial support in higher education; more successful applications to universities).

The benefits for students also include greater opportunities for international students to access higher education in the UK or their home country, and more stimulation for UK students when international students are learning alongside them, as mentioned in evidence to the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG, 2018:36). Colleges reported that their students also developed greater cultural awareness, enhanced motivation and '*new skills and qualities*'. It is '*life changing*' reported one college.

The benefits for *staff* involved were often similar to those of their students, but less well evidenced. Applications included qualitative data which argued that there were,

- fresh insights into pedagogy and greater confidence to enhance teaching skills and curriculum development
- renewed energy and sense of purpose; sometimes in a life-changing way
- greater abilities in leading professional development, presenting at conferences, and leading new partnerships
- reduced staff turnover; greater student satisfaction with teaching; greater staff satisfaction.

Earlier, mention was made of leadership development, in the UK as well as for colleges in other countries; significant specialist teacher education in other countries and the UK (for example, on inclusive practice matters); and more confident partnerships with employers in the UK as a direct result of international work.

The benefits to the college *curriculum* included:

- co-operative development with other colleges in other countries (e.g. on social inclusion; electric vehicle maintenance; technical and vocational education)
- collaborative curriculum projects across different departments which enhances quality and stimulates both staff and students

- new and specialist courses such as patisseries, robotics and social inclusion topics, leading to more dynamic opportunities with local employers
- enhanced curriculum, better accreditation, better teaching and learning materials, and more dynamic experiences for students
- greater use of international comparisons (e.g. engineering in Germany and Finland) which helped enhance teaching content
- staff and students returning to share ideas with the majority who have not travelled (e.g. through fashion shows; film and video work).

Other curriculum developments enhanced through international work in Beacon colleges resulted in some niche marketing opportunities for commerce and business locally, better apprenticeship placements, and uplifting course management opportunities through (e.g.) project-based learning.

The benefit to *local communities and employers* mentioned by colleges included,

- local companies receiving visitors from other countries, securing publicity and international connections
- greater involvement by employers in the life of the college (e.g. through shows; exhibitions; discussing new equipment; new apprenticeships)
- a 'widening participation' element (e.g. community impact of raising aspirations and achievement where students may never have travelled abroad before)
- local communities supporting students from other countries who need accommodation.

In addition, colleges reported that their international work resulted in greater spending on local services such as transport and shops, and improvement to school development – such as learning Mandarin; taking part in vocational programmes; sharing pedagogies.

The benefit *to the UK*, to colleges and to the college profile included,

- enhanced reputation and communication through media and publicity in the college locality
- greater development of vocational education and training internationally
- increased income from international students; from grants and project funding; from consultancy and new business opportunities (e.g. opening college branches internationally; training FE leaders; offering college-devised UK qualifications)
- reduced staff turnover and enhanced staff morale.

5. Measuring the benefits

Measuring benefits is always problematic: showing causal links is, for example, often not straightforward and yet it is often measurement that can convince policy makers of the value of what FE colleges can achieve. For example, it is unlikely that a causal relationship can be identified in most colleges between international activity and college reputation, but collectively the college sector might find this of great value. It is likely that evidence about what international work brings to local communities, to colleges and the UK could be collated in

order to make a convincing case for expanding the work, at the very least. It may be much easier to measure the benefits for individual students, staff and the curriculum.

5.1 Measuring the benefits to students

Aside from personal testimony, *measurements* of individual student benefit are being both set and achieved. The data includes qualifications achieved by students involved, compared with other students in their cohort; progression identified as a direct result of international activity; enhanced employability and employment of students involved; widening participation impact.

Because this data is fairly standard, such measures could be the norm in any college involved in international work. However, although all 37 colleges reported qualitative information on their international work, a minority (22 per cent) of those applying for Beacon Awards supported their application with detailed figures on the impact of the work, or the benefits to individuals or to the college. Colleges using Erasmus+ funding were more likely to keep good records on impact, possibly because of the reporting requirements of the Erasmus+ programme, but not all colleges did so, or were using Erasmus+ funding.

One good example of a college using measurable data found that students who had undertaken Erasmus+ mobilities were much more successful in achieving their qualifications:

The impact on the students can be evidenced in many ways. For example, the information below shows the increase in successful completion and attainment of students who completed an Erasmus+ exchange against students who hadn't (statistics from 2015/2016):

- Motor Vehicle 3% increase
- Construction 6% increase
- Business and Travel and Tourism 11% increase
- Hair and beauty 16% increase
- Childcare 12% increase
- IT 13% increase. (C11a)

Other colleges were also able to collect data as evidence of benefit, comparing those involved in Erasmus+, for example, with the success rates of the rest of the student cohort:

... significantly higher achievement rate:

Retention Passed Achievement

Erasmus+ Participants 2016-17 94% 98% 95%

Cross College Learners 2016-17 91% 91% 83% (C14a)

Almost no colleges reported on student progression. However, greater focus on the skills students gain during international visits has led to some students excelling and this led directly to progression:

Participants spent 2 weeks experiencing the life of an elite athlete using top class facilities; as participant Ellie said: "Rather than training 2 or 3 times a week, we had sessions 2 or 3 times a day so we all saw a real improvement in our game." ... both the

male and female teams won gold medals at the AoC National Championships this Spring, a feat not achieved... for 30 years (C15a)

One of the most challenging areas to find reliable measures would be in the development of soft skills – those skills which are cherished as keys to employability – although one college did report, through self-assessment:

... opportunity to develop the soft skills needed for employment. Participant feedback gathered by Erasmus+ shows:

- 90% were more confident of their abilities
- 84% reported improved problem-solving
- 90% reported better teamwork skills
- 88% felt more able to adapt to new situations. (C15a)

This is particularly useful since it matches the responses from the Erasmus+ survey carried out by the Association of Colleges (2019:6)⁴. In the survey, colleges reported,

- Improved team-working - 94%
- Improved technical knowledge in vocational/academic subject- 91%
- Improved problem-solving - 91%
- Improved communication - 91%
- Improved decision-making - 84%

Success in work experience was also used as a valid measure by one Beacon college:

- 100% of students now achieve external work placements following the project. (C12a)

A widening participation focus on disadvantage was one of the strongest findings in this short study. This theme is important to colleges following successive national policy steers on widening participation. Almost every college aiming for a Beacon Award secured the involvement of disadvantaged students, particularly those using Erasmus+ funding, often with very good results. *'It gives you hope'* noted one student, whose college said that,

...over half of our participants (including staff) had never left the UK before this project, some had not travelled more than 45 miles away from their home location before. We introduced a new innovation to fund International study as a "life changer", setting out to make a difference to best serve our community, and we have done so with unprecedented impact. (C11a)

Colleges took pains to describe the setting for their international work; stating that it was usually not intended for those who could pay for 'optional extras' but for whom the experience would benefit those *with most distance to travel*:

...our immediate community is diverse with over 50 nationalities represented by our learners; it has significant need for ESOL provision and has more people living in multiple deprivation than any other local authority area with high concentrations of population with poor educational achievement, high dependency on means-tested benefits and poor health. Currently nearly half of our learners have literacy and numeracy Level 1 or below... (C13a)

This theme of widening participation and responding to disadvantage meant that colleges sometimes used relative disadvantage to measure impact:

The cohort included learners with social anxiety paired with organised staff mentors overseas. Learners have developed personal skills to enable previously unconceived positive progression. The programme welcomes applicants who we feel will have the most significant growth no matter how much support their placement may require us to organise... (C12a)

and students responded warmly:

"I was home schooled before. They invited me even though I needed support. This trip has given me confidence and shown me that there are different ways to think, act, and work. It makes me more employable. It opens and informs people's awareness and perspectives about other cultures." (C12a, L3 student)

Several colleges specifically involved students with disadvantaged backgrounds in their international work. In several colleges this was often 50 per cent of those undertaking mobilities. Colleges noticed a rise in these students' achievement rates as a result of participation.

One innovative way of determining the value added to each individual student through international work was used by a college to show the distance travelled by individuals and the college itself, set against a baseline. The amount of complexity involved in creating and validating such data, while bringing together in one place some of the disparate variables necessary for evaluating the work, may militate against using this kind of 'value added' model. However, it indicates that colleges themselves are anxious to find a way to measure the impact of international work on individual students.

Finally, measures used by colleges included one example of progression data based on financial benefits for individual UK learners:

Seven students graduated with a total of 140 direct credits to universities... In total, students earned 190+ direct credits and \$247,508 in scholarships: "The biggest benefit for me was using it on college applications and scholarships. It helped me receive over \$6,000 in scholarships (at that time) and I also got pre-admitted to the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan as a freshman." (C3a)

Again, this may only be appropriate for some students. In short, then, measuring the benefit to students is currently being done in a minority of colleges and not in any systematic way. Where there is reporting, measures included:

- retention rate and qualifications achieved by students involved, compared with other students in their cohort
- progression identified as a direct result of international activity
- student self-reporting on increase in employability skills, or employment or work experience of students involved
- widening participation impact, measured through some disadvantage element
- financial and other benefits to individuals.

5.2 Measuring the benefits to staff

Staff development impact is measurable. In one college faculty, as a direct outcome from international visits, there has been a thirty per cent increase in staff applications, an improved teaching grade profile and 100 per cent positive observation outcomes, with increased student attendance (from 73 per cent to 95 per cent) and student satisfaction (17 per cent increase in one year). One of the programme leaders reported,

“The best CPD experience of my career and the most impactful, the Erasmus+ experience has totally changed my approach to teaching and learning in the classroom.” (C12a)

However, colleges reported very few tangible measures in relation to staff involvement. One senior manager guessed at how many of his college staff were involved:

Off the top of my head, 25 or 30 people a year probably either go out or deliver training to international students here... I think that sounds broadly right. (C9i)

Evaluating the impact on staff participation in international work would help colleges and the sector to show the full range of benefits that international work offers. For example, two colleges noted a strategic decision to offer opportunities to all staff through competitive application. Other colleges indicated that they could identify data, such as the number of applications for international visits; improvements in the quality of teaching; staff turnover and satisfaction; and student satisfaction before and after staff undertook international work. This might offer substantial evidence on the benefits to staff of international engagement.

5.3 Measuring the benefit to the college curriculum

At present, colleges are reporting but not measuring the impact on the curriculum. However, impact is identified and recorded in qualitative terms, and it may be appropriate to continue in this way. What seems to matter is that if colleges are *asked* to describe the impact of international work on curriculum development and their responses, they can describe exciting new curriculum developments in, for example, engineering, early years work, art and design, inclusive practice, and hospitality. Without their international partners, students and staff may not have such a rich curriculum. This included interdisciplinary work, and adaptation of systems or methodologies from abroad that can ultimately support all students in the college to understand approaches in other countries and improve sectors in the longer term.

5.4 Measuring the benefit to local communities and to employers

Much of the benefit to local communities and to employers described by Beacon colleges starts with qualitative data. Tantalisingly, colleges indicate that they *could* report on quantitative increases as a result of their international work. For example, in employer involvement; increases in apprentice take-up; and through contributions to equipment or CPD for companies and the college.

In addition, colleges suggested other more unexpected benefits of international work, such as enhanced adult education provision in the community; impact on families committed to the international work; levels of student involvement in community action.

5.5. Measuring the benefit to the UK, to colleges and to college reputations

One college reported that staff turnover had reduced to 2.09 per cent as a direct result of their international work, which provides benefit to both the college and to students. It is suggested that this is the result of both '*college values and opportunities provided*' (C17a).

The reputation of each college, and the FE sector as a whole, depends upon case studies as much as data. A more concerted effort to collate this in accessible forms would do much to enhance reputations and to help develop purposeful international activity in FE. For example, one college asked students to take a photographic record of their visits, to do three social media postings a day, and to help with maintaining a filmed record of group experience. This encouraged more staff and students to get involved and subsequently helped to promote more of an international mind-set (C12a).

Income was the most consistent and evident measure of success in relation to the Beacon applications. While helpful, this may have also reduced the number of colleges actively involved in seeking to undertake international work. The complexity of seeking and managing additional funding for international work, and the narrow margins involved, may not commend international work to college managers. This is why additional clarity on benefits and impact could help colleges develop in this area.

Some colleges earn significantly from international work. A 'mixed economy' of activity can enable colleges to develop considerably:

Over the past 3-year period, [the college] has secured cross-sectoral international projects worth a total value of €6 million that has enabled futuristic curriculum development, integration of exemplary teaching and learning, innovative youth engagement approaches and increased inclusion of disadvantaged groups. (C18a)

Attention to the 'bottom line' is significant, but so is the contribution colleges make to the development of vocational education and training internationally. For example, one college reported that,

The project has value for the UK... The estimated revenue is estimated at £1.5million and is expected upon market maturity to rise to £18 million. (C27a)

Colleges found it relatively easy to measure the financial benefit to their budgets:

Year on year growth in Erasmus+ funding –€800,000 in 2016, €1million in 2017 and €1.1million in 2018. (C18a)

This could also be shown in terms of trend data, for those developing the work over several years, as one college reported:

*The five-year income: International Growth at X College
Year International Student Numbers Total Income:
2017/18 90 £398,724
2016/17 48 £226,495
2015/16 27 £101,869
2014/15 18 £100,130
2013/14 1 £6,400 (C10a)*

One college went so far as to model the impact of international staff and students on the local economy:

Modelling suggests [to us] that college and student spend resulting from international activity adds approximately £1m annually to the local and UK economy. (C17a)

Fees, consultancy and project funding enable colleges to develop work which benefits students, staff and the curriculum. Most colleges said their approach was strategic:

We have a 5-year strategic plan that sets out our aspiration to grow international delivery to generate financial, human and social sustainability. (D28a)

The majority of colleges seek to develop the work wherever possible, rather than to generate a surplus. One college noted that managing college expectations was also a challenge:

Yes, this isn't a commercial project. This is a learning project ... it's all about sharing learning and experiences... one of the challenges that we have is the board understand[ing] what we're doing but some of the questions that I have to answer from the board are, 'is this going to make us any money?' And the answer at the moment is, 'no, it's not.'...If we were to use this to make money the college would have to invest significantly in a commercial programme to develop those opportunities in India ... [the Board] think that when I go over there that I'm going to come back and say, 'There are five employers that want to work with us.' And there is, I mean we do come back with that but actually, then to convert that into commercial income to the college is a huge effort, a huge effort. ...I suppose a lot of this is managing expectations of a board... (C7i)

One college described the impact of a strong partnership with China to illustrate the importance of international work for mutual development rather than profit:

The relationship with the college in Shanghai is not about money; as a college we make no money out of the relationship, it is about sharing ideas, improving practice and becoming more global. We do not recruit any students from Shanghai or deliver in-country... (C10a)

Colleges do not usually see 'the bottom line' as their prime motivation for international work, and were anxious to point out that their intention is to add value to students' employability or staff's professional development. For example:

So yes, one of the benefits to the college is financial and we're never going to deny that, but we also like to demonstrate, you know, the qualitative impact we have on people overseas... (C9i)

There is no doubt that measuring the impact of international work through who benefits and how, could add to a college's confidence and reputation. Used wisely such information can also add to the sector's reputation. Although showing causal relationships between investment and wider benefits is always challenging, some measurements are worth considering. During visits to Beacon colleges, for example, it was suggested that data on the following might be available and convincing:

- enhanced staff morale, reduced staff turnover (survey data)
- impact on social media and public visibility (through media coverage)
- revenue, and in a few cases capital, to the college (budget reports)
- estimating student and staff spend in the locality (by project)
- exemplars of impact and mutual development (by project).

6. Features of successful international activity

Although there is no particular ‘model’ of international work that is common enough to classify, there are several features which contribute to success.

First, although a minority of colleges have a substantial commitment to their international work, this work is not heterogenous. It is usually made up of a variety of activities described earlier and in Table 1. In addition, where there is a mixed set of opportunities, colleges have found multiple benefits to students and staff. These included: curriculum development; leadership enhancement; increasing student self-confidence, employability and achievement; widening participation.

There are a variety of funding opportunities to support the curriculum and international mobilities. Some colleges were keen to share their sources of funding for international work. One college offered a list of these:

- Erasmus+ Mobility, Strategic Partnership and International Credit Mobility
- British Council International Skills Partnerships (ISP) and Charles de Gaulle
- Invest [area name]
- Department for International Trade
- Daiwa Foundation
- TVET UK
- Local Councils
- Networks of Dutch, Finnish, Basque, Scottish, U.S. and UK Colleges (C15a)

A mixed set of activities, funded often from different sources, meant that colleges were able to manage the ups and downs of securing funding. In 2018, for example, the 26 Beacon applications cited 46 different funding sources. This in turn put pressure on staff in relation to bid-writing, project management and teaching loads. In addition, the highly commended colleges visited by assessors had all found the need for dedicated support staff time to keep the records, and to manage the logistics, like booking tickets, assisting with accommodation, and helping on passport applications. Often the different elements of the work were funded by different funds and criteria. Most cited were: Erasmus+ (14 colleges); British Council (10 colleges); national governments (2 colleges); fees from mainstream international students (9 colleges); main college budgets (9 colleges).

Second, a few colleges report on FE’s international work successfully. Although colleges are making a substantial contribution to vocational education in other countries, unlike the Higher Education sector with estimated exports of £650million, little mention is made of the value of FE work in the DfE/DTI international strategy (HMG, 2021). This amounted to £65.5million in student fees alone in 2016/17 (APPG, 2018:13). In addition, some colleges are reporting substantial contributions to leadership skills and qualifications in other countries. Also mentioned in the Beacon applications was significant specialist teacher education, for example in relation to inclusive educational practice. It is suggested in this report and elsewhere (APPG, 2018:29) that transnational education benefits UK students. The value of FE college contributions to this work both in the UK and in other countries is not yet well recognised, which is why promotion of this work through national policy documents might enhance the reputation of FE in the UK and beyond.

Third, a clear strategic commitment to international work helps staff and students in UK colleges to understand where international work fits into each college's mission. There is sometimes a statement on the benefit to students and staff involved, and the intention of spreading good technical and vocational education beyond the immediate college. This was evident in almost all of the 'highly commended' colleges applying for the International Award. In three colleges this had resulted in a commitment to offer an international experience to all staff and students, which in turn impacted on staff appraisals, increased student applications, and provided a set of criteria for mobility selection. In these colleges students and staff said they felt that 'an international experience' was open to everyone equally. In turn, this commitment was usually supported by dedicated administrative staff and a more focused approach to project applications.

Fourth, a real commitment to recording impact. All commended colleges were able to identify impact on UK staff and students. This was mostly qualitative, although some were able to set out measures which offered quantitative data. For example, of 26 applications in 2018 only seven cited quantitative measures in relation to student benefits and only one in relation to the impact on staff. However, five were clear about the financial benefit to the college. Such data, when used more widely, would add immensely to our understanding of the impact across the sector. Nevertheless, many colleges did find powerful qualitative stories to exemplify impact. There is a message here for future applicants and for the way in which the criteria are set out for the Award. Although impact was often described in terms of income, colleges are beginning to look harder at the rise in achievements, retention and progression for students as a result of international work. For staff, impact measures included better teaching, increased morale and better figures on continuing professional development.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

The purpose of this report was to use the evidence from the Beacon Awards process to report on how international work in FE impacts on staff, students and colleges. The report also identifies some of the measures which colleges currently use, and could use in the future, to identify these benefits. Such a development might enable more colleges to take advantage of international work.

For students, college international work has provided opportunities to increase their achievement, progression, confidence and self-esteem. Greater success in work experience, employability and employment can be measured. There is added value for individuals which includes future financial benefit. For staff, international opportunities have resulted in improved teaching quality, increased recruitment, better attendance and greater staff satisfaction. Curriculum impact includes innovative new modules and courses, greater interdisciplinary work, and the use of better systems and methods from abroad. For employers, their involvement has been more dynamic, with more apprenticeships and greater contributions from employers to colleges and vice versa. Families and local communities have benefited through income from visitors, friendships and cultural exchange. The profile of further education colleges in the UK has been raised through international work. Contributions made to technical and vocational work in other countries have been important, and the income from fees, consultancy and project work is clearly measurable. Almost all of these benefits could be recorded and some of them measured.

The British Council International Award has provided an opportunity to reflect on the value of international work and what it means for students, staff, colleges and the UK. The Award has attracted good descriptions of the best practice in international work and offers ideas from colleges on how the work could be enhanced further. The judgement in the UK's International Education Strategy suggests that FE could make a more powerful contribution:

In terms of international activity overseas, there is still significant progress to be made in encouraging UK skills organisations to consider taking their offer internationally. (HMG,2021)

To respond to this will require some information, support and encouragement, as suggested in the AoC FE national survey (AoC, 2021:#17,#71). The Beacon Award applications suggest that this is possible.

There is one further point not raised thus far. Many of the colleges referred to the wish to develop 'a *global mind-set*' in their students. It is suggested that,⁵

For many of the colleges... the primary aim of their international work is to provide learners with opportunities and experiences that will benefit their future and support their development as global citizens (Hogg, 2018:3).

Some of the work recorded by colleges and brought out through the Beacon Award show that international work can be life changing and life enhancing – both for students, their families and for staff. It can change outlook, develop and sustain careers, and result in richer and higher quality FE provision. In addition, the work has the potential to change public attitudes and improve the reputation of colleges and the sector.

To respond to the comments in the international strategy, three sets of actions might be helpful.

First, in response to the UK international strategy and policy interest, the British Council and Association of Colleges, together with partners, might develop an FE international strategy. This would include a focus on UK students and staff, as well as the already considerable international work done by colleges which contributes to the UK economy. This would consider the benefit to UK students, staff and colleges and aim to increase the reputation of FE in the UK as suggested by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG, 2018:35), rather than leaving it simply as '*...a soft and successful export for the UK*' (AoC, 2018:#20). Such a strategy might involve a blueprint for college international work, encourage greater co-operative efforts between colleges on international matters⁶, and initiate further research on the development of international work in FE. Such research might include the successful AoC annual surveys, with additional fields on the benefits of the work. Other research might consider what data could easily be gathered; what models are most helpful; what the barriers are to developing and managing international work and how they can be addressed, and why some colleges do not apply for Beacon Awards in relation to their international work.

Second, to *support colleges* considering the development of international work, it is suggested that partnership work and other opportunities are aimed at helping colleges to secure funding for international development work. Colleges may need some continuing assistance to develop and sustain international work in order to enhance staff professional development and student opportunities, together with methods of evaluating the work. This is indicated in the International Education Strategy (HMG, 2021:44-45). More support from development agencies, and better information in order to take advantage of opportunities beyond inbound student recruitment, has been recommended elsewhere (AoC, 2019:#20). It may require colleges to record qualitative data, as well as some of the measurable benefits of international

work in a systematic and evaluative way - to show impact on students, staff, local communities including employers, and the college reputation.

Third, to *enhance the Beacon Awards* it is suggested that colleges might be encouraged to record the impact of international work more carefully, as in (2) above. This would also assist colleges to apply more effectively for development work and grant funding. More convincing evidence of the impact on staff, students, the curriculum and colleges themselves would focus applicants on the purpose of the work, its value and quality. To attract more applicants for the Award may require a review of the Award criteria, assistance from previous Award winners, and help with making a stronger application.

There is a great deal to play for:

We will encourage more organisations with relevant expertise to provide high quality and evidence-based training and development for teaching staff in the [FE] sector... including peer-to-peer learning and technical masterclasses based on international best practice⁷. (DfE,2021:#152)

8. Acknowledgements

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9. Annexes

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Annex B: Criteria for the AoC British Council International Award for 2018 and 2019

This award, sponsored by the British Council, seeks to celebrate an outstanding example of a College's international work. The winner will have exceptional strategies to embed international activity within the broader college aims and have identified how this contributes to improved organisational, staff and curriculum development and learner outcomes. In particular assessors will look for effective and imaginative approaches undertaken to use international work to raise aspirations, share best practice and act as a catalyst for improvements in

teaching and learning. Outcomes will be measured by evidenced improvements to key college objectives through international work. International work is varied and so long as applications meet the criteria there is no absolute requirement for international travel to have taken place.

When completing the **stage 1** application (max 1,000 words) please note that the assessors will be scoring equally for **innovation, impact and sustainability**. Applicants are advised that when constructing their submission, they consider carefully where best to place evidence to ensure the full range of the Award criteria are covered.

Colleges that exceed the AoC Beacon Standard will be invited to submit a full project brief second stage (building on the content in the first stage application), that will provide comprehensive additional evidence such as: effective targeting of under-represented student groups, innovative curriculum or course design, highly effective learner support systems, or the creation of imaginative opportunities for vocational learning.

Sponsor's Criteria

Colleges wishing to apply for this award could consider some or all of the following:

Successful methods to encourage international collaboration and exchange to help shape an international mind-set in learners in the UK, particularly where they have suffered disadvantage or are an underrepresented group in a vocational area;

Work with overseas partners to support the provision of imaginative opportunities for vocational learning that effectively raises aspirations and targets particular groups or individuals who can benefit;

Imaginative and innovative ways of sharing best practice with counterparts overseas that improves the reputation and connections with other countries, supported by sound quality improvement strategies;

Partnership working where colleges together with overseas peers work to enhance organisational or staff capacity including the improvement of teaching and learning;

The identification of where international activity has contributed to the benefit of the wider organisation and local community, including the promotion of equality and diversity. (AoC,2019b)

Annex C: Research interview questions

Protocol

Firstly, thank you for agreeing to be interviewed.

I am one of the Researchers from the University of Wolverhampton identifying some of the benefits of international work in FE colleges. We have been appointed by the British Council in partnership with the Association of Colleges. The questions I am going to ask you are listed on pages 3-4.

Aim of Project

To identify the benefits of international work in FE colleges

Purpose

The British Council and the Association of Colleges wish to promote and disseminate the value of international work in further education colleges in the UK. This short

research project aims to support this by examining the evidence about the benefits of internationalisation at institutional and individual level, and identifying models of provision and their benefits and transferability.

Structure of interview (opinion, open questions)

We would like to ask you a few open questions to get your honest opinion and feedback about your international work. It will take about twenty minutes.

Tape Recorder

I would like your permission to record this interview using an audio-recorder. Your participation in the process and data will be anonymous and kept confidential and we will ensure that all identifying material will be destroyed after a year.

If you have any questions about my credentials or this short research project please contact:

Julia Handelman-Smith, Head of Internationalism, British Council [contact details removed]

Do you have any questions so far?

Semi structured interview schedule

Scope and nature of international involvement

1. What is the scope of your international work in the college [e.g. exchanges; visits; professional development]?

Benefits to colleges

2. What do you feel are the benefits to your college of international work (e.g. financial, developmental and reputational)?

3. Are you evaluating these in any way?

4. What are the benefits to institutions and how are these commonly measured?

Benefits to staff

5. What are the benefits to college staff?

6. How are these benefits measured [e.g. using the dimensions of personal, situational and professional]?

Benefits to local communities

7. What are the benefits to (i) employers and (ii) the local communities, do you think?

Benefits to students

8. What are the benefits to students of your international work?

e.g.

- students who have participated in visits overseas;

-
- students who have not visited but have experienced international work in their college
 - the extent to which there is any development of an international 'mind-set' among FE students
 - disadvantaged students or students under-represented in a vocational area

Models

9. Do you recognise some of these types of provision? Which ones do you think are strongest in your college?

- teaching international students in the UK
- teaching students outside the UK
- internationalising the college curriculum
- staff exchange and staff development
- student exchange, student visits, work experience
- home students benefiting from the international work of staff or other students
- institutional twinning
- project work/consultancy/technical assistance (non-profit and profit)
- cultural activity, including charitable and philanthropic work
- other types of work (e.g. international competition work)

The future

10. All is speculative at present but what do you *hope for* in developing international work in your college?

11. How should the benefits of international work be measured?

12. Thinking ahead, what recommendations and suggestions on future data requests and measures would you make?

i.e. what would be reasonable to ask colleges to provide in the way of information about international work?