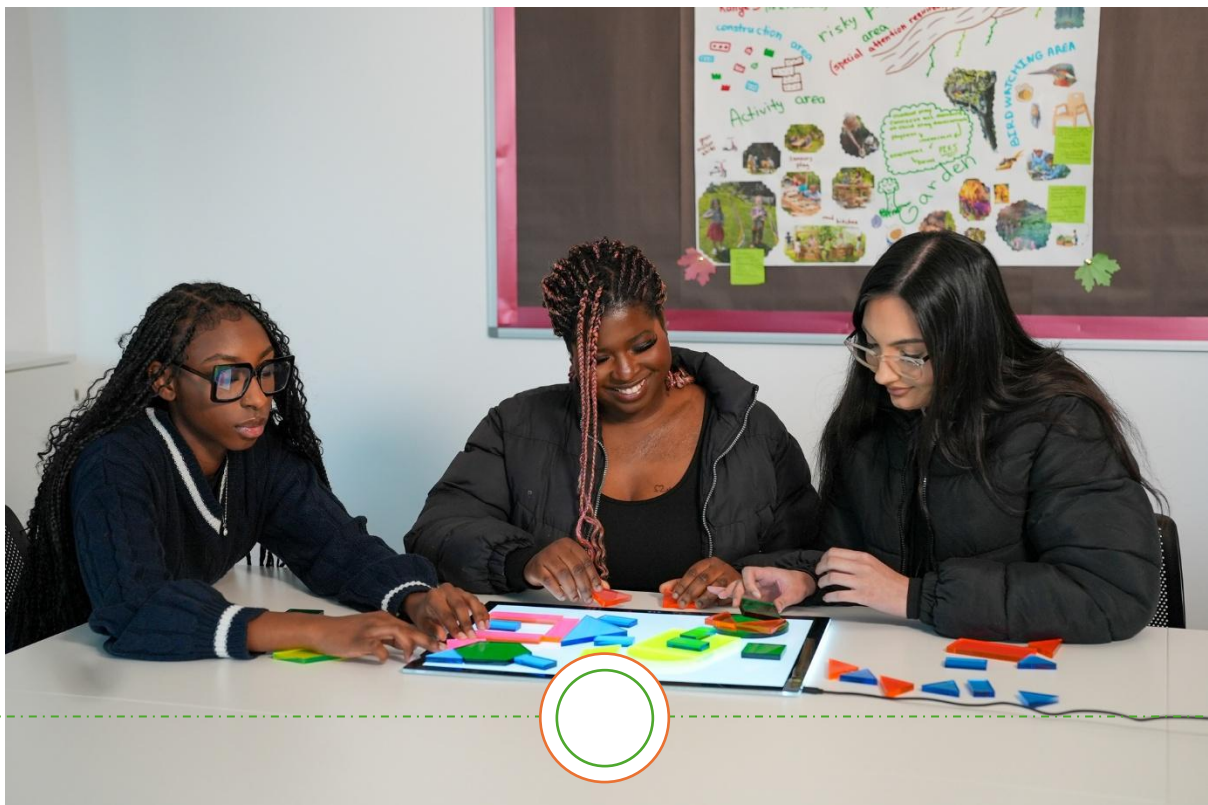




QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project 2025-26

Flexible pathways and effective transitions in college-based HE



Final Report

June 2026

**Authors: Matt O’Leary, Shaun Allen-Dooley, Claudine Barnes,
Nicola Burt, Vanessa Cui, Chrissie Draper, Simon Horner and
Richard Jones**

About this report

This report is the final project report for the QAA, its members and the wider academic community who are interested in student and staff collaboration in college-based higher education. The *Flexible pathways and effective transitions in college-based HE* project was funded by the QAA's Collaborative Enhancement Fund. For more information about the QAA's Collaborative Enhancement Fund and funded projects, visit:

<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/membership/collaborative-enhancement-projects>.

Authors: Matt O'Leary, Shaun Allen-Dooley, Claudine Barnes, Nicola Burt, Vanessa Cui, Chrissie Draper, Simon Horner and Richard Jones

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For further information about CoCO, please contact: matthew.oleary@bcu.ac.uk

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Executive summary

Further education colleges (FECs) play a critical role in widening access to higher education (HE), particularly for students from underrepresented and non-traditional backgrounds. However, college-based higher education (CBHE) remains under-researched and presents distinct challenges in supporting students' transitions into and through HE study. This Collaborative Enhancement Project (CEP), funded by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), addressed this gap by examining how flexible pathways and effective transitions can be enhanced through student–staff collaboration.

The project involved five FECs across England and was underpinned by the Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO), an innovative model designed to facilitate structured, dialogic engagement between students and staff. Participants undertook two iterative cycles of collaborative inquiry, focusing on key transition-related themes including academic confidence, learner independence, assessment and feedback practices, and engagement with HE learning expectations.

The findings highlight that successful transition in CBHE is shaped by both academic and affective factors. Across all case studies, students reported increased confidence, improved understanding of assessment expectations, and greater engagement with feedback processes. Participation in CoCO enabled students to develop a stronger sense of ownership over their learning, alongside enhanced reflective and critical thinking skills. For staff, the project supported the development of more student-centred and facilitative pedagogical approaches, reinforcing the value of student voice in shaping teaching practice.

A consistent theme across institutions was the importance of pedagogical relationships in supporting transition. Collaborative dialogue between students and staff helped to build trust, challenge traditional hierarchies and create more inclusive learning environments. These relational dynamics were closely linked to improvements in students' sense of belonging and academic identity, both of which are critical for persistence and success in HE.

The project also demonstrated the value of embedding transition support within curricula. Practices such as explicit teaching of assessment criteria, structured opportunities for feedback engagement and scaffolded academic skills development were shown to be particularly effective when integrated into programme delivery. In addition, experiential and collaborative learning approaches contributed to the development of transferable skills and professional identity.

While the project identified clear benefits, it also highlighted practical considerations for implementation, including the need for time, structured support for reflective practice and flexibility to adapt approaches to local contexts. Despite these challenges, the CoCO model proved to be a robust and adaptable framework that can support sustainable enhancement of learning and teaching in CBHE.

Overall, this project provides strong evidence that student–staff partnership approaches can play a transformative role in supporting effective transitions in CBHE. It

Flexible Pathways and Effective Transitions in College-Based Higher Education

offers a scalable model for enhancing student engagement, improving academic outcomes and fostering inclusive and collaborative learning cultures across the sector.

Contents

Executive summary	2
Introduction	7
Project overview	7
Project team	9
Birmingham City University	9
University Centre Bishop Burton	9
Derby College Group	9
Nottingham College	10
Solihull College and University Centre	10
Walsall College	10
Delivery of project	11
Project methodology	12
Participants	12
Data collection methods	13
Principles and Practice of the Cycle of Collaborative Observation	15
Project training and resources	17
College Case Studies	18
Bishop Burton College and University Centre	18
College Context	18
Participants	18
Areas of Focus	19
Key Focal Points for CoCO 1 and 2	19
Key Outcomes and Learnings	21
Derby College Group	22
College Context	22
Participants	23
Areas of Focus	24
Key Focal Points for CoCO 1 and 2	25
Key Outcomes and Learnings	26
Nottingham College	29
College Context	29
Participants	29
Areas of Focus	30
Key Outcomes and Learnings from Cycle 1	30
Key Outcomes and Learnings from Cycle 2	31

Flexible Pathways and Effective Transitions in College-Based Higher Education

Overall Discussion.....	32
Solihull College and University Centre	34
College Context.....	34
Participants.....	34
Areas of Focus – Case study 1 (SENDIP)	35
Key Focal Points for CoCO Cycle 1 (SENDIP).....	35
Key Outcomes and Learnings from CoCO Cycle 1 (SENDIP)	35
Key Outcomes and Learnings from CoCO Cycle 2 (SENDIP)	36
Areas of Focus – Case study 2 (Animal Behaviour and Welfare).....	36
Key Focal Points for CoCO Cycles 1 and 2 (Animal Behaviour and Welfare)	37
Key Outcomes and Learnings from CoCO Cycles 1 and 2	37
Walsall College	39
College Context.....	39
Participants.....	40
Areas of Focus.....	41
Key Focal Points for CoCO Cycles 1 and 2.....	41
Key Outcomes and Learnings.....	42
Synopsis of Evaluation Findings across the Five Colleges.....	44
Key Findings from Cycle 1	44
Key Findings from Cycle 2	46
Implementing CoCo	47
Conclusion and recommendations.....	49
Concluding comments	49
Recommendations	50
References	52
Glossary	54

Introduction

Project overview

This QAA funded Collaborative Enhancement Project (CEP) focused entirely on College Based Higher Education (CBHE) providers, bringing together staff and students from five Further Education colleges (FECs) across England. The project was led by Professor Matt O’Leary from [Birmingham City University](#) and built upon work carried out on a previous QAA CEP, [Enhancing Learning and Teaching Quality through Collaborative Observation](#).

Underpinned by a student-staff collaborative partnership, the project’s core thematic focus centred on how FECs understand and support students’ effective transitions into and through CBHE. Students worked with staff to explore and capture their transition experiences and challenges across a range of subject areas grouped into discrete case studies, each with a specific area of focus. The key findings from these case studies are discussed in detail in this report, along with their implications for future policy and practice in CBHE.

From the five participating FECs, discipline specific or cross-disciplinary case study groups were formed in each college. Case study groups undertook two cycles of collaborative enquiry over 2025-2026, with the focus of each cycle decided collaboratively by participants of the case study groups in relation to their individual needs and interests. Although each participant group had its own specific focus, all the groups shared the core partnership focus of supporting flexible pathways and effective transitions into and through CBHE.

The overarching project objectives were:

1. To increase student engagement in shaping their learning experiences by empowering them to become directly involved in informing and improving understanding about supporting their pathways and transitions into and through CBHE;
2. To build students’ confidence in transitioning to HE study through collaborating with academic staff to learn about HE learning and teaching expectations and practices;
3. To prepare, train and support students and staff from 5 FECs to work collaboratively to undertake 2 cycles of collaborative observation across 10 different case studies
4. To generate an evidence and practice base to inform and improve CBHE students’ learning experiences for their FECs, QAA members and the wider sector.

Each case study applied the same innovative and collaborative observation model known as the [Cycle of Collaborative Observation \(CoCO\)](#). As shown in **Figure 1**, CoCO provided a framework for participants to engage in iterative cycles of

collaborative observation, discussion and reflection. Through such collaborative work between staff and students, CoCO facilitated the realisation of the shared project objectives by empowering participants to inform and develop shared understandings and cooperatively support effective pathways and transitions into and through CBHE.

Implementation of CoCO was supported by the project lead Professor Matt O’Leary and Birmingham City University colleagues Dr Shaun Allen-Dooley and Dr Vanessa Cui through facilitated training sessions for all participants and continued support throughout the duration of the project.

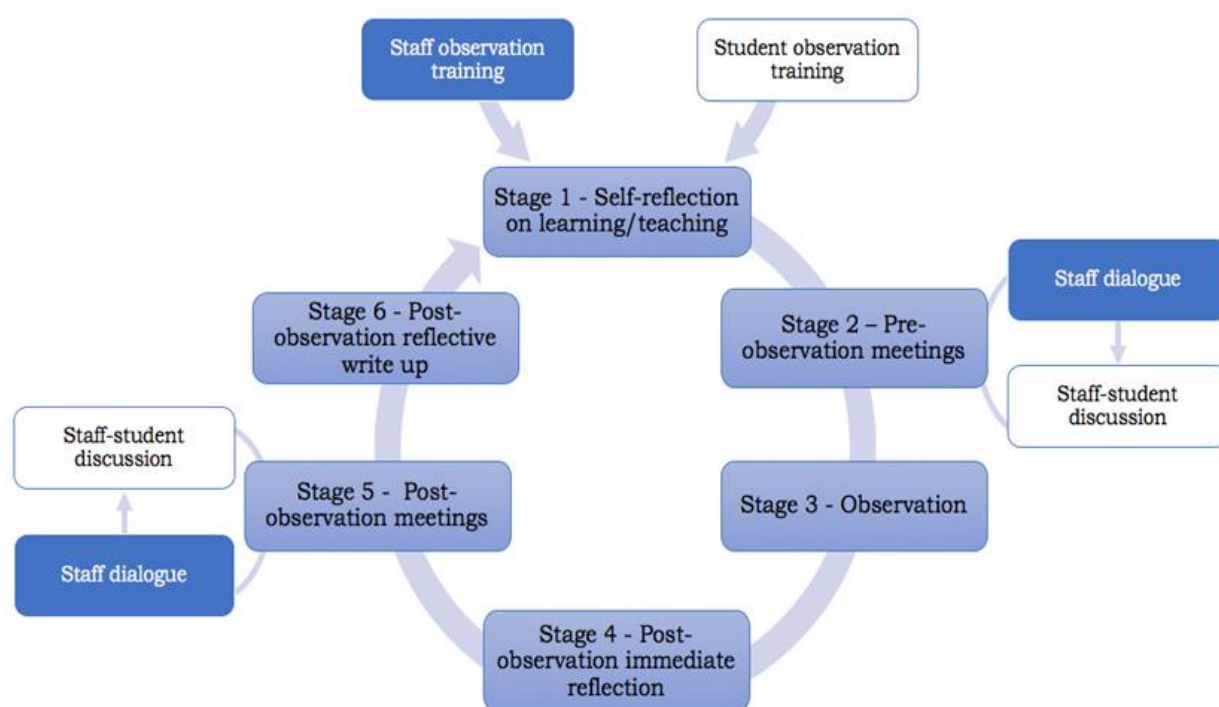


Figure 1 – Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO)

CoCO allowed for staff and students to actively engage in a process of collective reflexivity. By collaboratively observing, reflecting on and discussing their experiences and perceptions of teaching and learning together, students and staff were able to enter into a process of collective meaning making, which was an integral part of enabling both parties to develop their knowledge and practices of how best to support effective transitions into and through CBHE.

Project team

The project team comprised three academics from BCU and five project leads from each of the participating colleges.

Birmingham City University

Professor Matt O’Leary is Professor of Education at Birmingham City University. He is one of the world’s leading experts on classroom observation. He is internationally renowned for his extensive body of work on the use of classroom/lesson observation in understanding and improving teaching and learning across colleges, schools and universities. He was the project lead.

Dr Vanessa Cui is currently a Senior Research Fellow at Birmingham City University Centre for the Study of Practices and Culture in Education (CSPACE). Her work with Professor Matt O’Leary on the use of observation in higher education has led to the creation and development of the Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO). She led on the evaluation of the project.

Dr Shaun Allen-Dooley is a postdoctoral education researcher and practitioner currently working across several research projects with colleagues in the School of Law and Social Sciences at Birmingham City University. Shaun recently completed his four-year PhD study focused on policy reforms in initial teacher education (ITE), with a particular focus on the effects of rhetorical (especially metaphorical) language used in education policies and practices. Shaun has supported this QAA CEP as its Research Assistant since February 2026.

University Centre Bishop Burton

Simon Horner has worked in HE for over 25 years and is currently the HE Life Skills Team Leader, working with a dedicated and highly qualified team of life coaches, learning mentors, access and participation officers and HE students at Bishop Burton University Centre through one to one and group support. He is also a Lecturer in Animal Science, teaching one day a week across a range of Animal Science programmes, including the Animal Case study group for this project.

Derby College Group

Chrissie Draper is a HE Advanced Teacher Practitioner, Lecturer and Programme Lead for BA (Hons) Security and Offender Management at Derby College Group. Alongside her lecturing role, she is the lead for the enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment across CBHE. Her work focuses on collaborative and reflective practice, with a particular interest in supporting student transition, engagement and success into HE study.

Nottingham College

Nicola Burt is the BA (Hons) Dance and Education Course Lead. Nicky is an experienced dance lecturer and course co-ordinator, with a career spanning both FE and HE. As Course Co-ordinator for the Level 3 Diploma in Dance, Nicky is responsible for curriculum design, assessment and student progression, as well as choreographing works for public platforms such as Dance4. Her teaching spans technique, choreography, performance and movement for actors, ensuring students develop both creative and technical excellence.

Solihull College and University Centre

Claudine Barnes is Head of Higher Education and Research. She has worked in the FE sector for 30 years, primarily as an FE and subsequently HE lecturer, teaching land-based animal programmes. Having now ditched the wellies and lab coat, she works as the Head of Higher Education and Research at the College.

Walsall College

Richard Jones is a Lecturer in Protective Services, with a passion for supporting students to reach their full potential, both academically and personally. Richard's commitment to his students goes beyond the classroom, driving innovative research that places student voice and experience at the heart of everything he does.

Delivery of project

The project has produced a range of outputs, which are free to access via the [project webpage](#). In summary, the project has achieved the following outcomes in each of the participating colleges:

- developed a reconceptualised approach to the use of observation as a tool to enhance the quality of teaching and learning experiences and challenges of transitioning to CBHE
- implemented two cycles of collaborative observation with students and staff across five colleges and evaluated its impact at the course level
- provided students and staff with conceptual and practical tools to promote authentic collaboration and inquiry into their learning and teaching experiences and challenges of CBHE
- produced a [series of blog posts](#) by the project team and project participants capturing their experiences and perspectives on student-staff collaborative partnerships through CoCO and the impact on supporting transitions into and through CBHE
- increased student engagement in shaping their learning experiences by empowering them to become directly involved in informing and improving the quality of learning and teaching experiences on their course
- delivered an end of project national showcase event to celebrate and disseminate participants' experiences and reflections on working together in their student-staff partnerships, along with discussing and presenting the findings and impact of their areas of focus.

Project methodology

Participants

The project participants comprised academic teaching staff and students across a range of CBHE courses across five colleges. All participants were volunteers. The CBHE leads across the 5 colleges worked with staff colleagues in their respective departments to identify potential HE programmes deemed suitable for the requirements of the project participation. Selective staff members from these programmes were approached by the CBHE leads, who also worked with the programme teams to identify potential student participants.

Following completion of the recruitment stage, all participants (both staff and students) were briefed on the aims, focus, anticipated outcomes and potential benefits of the project. They were fully informed that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw their participation at any point during the project. They were also fully informed that they had the choice to remain anonymous throughout the duration of the project or to have their identities disclosed should they wish to do so.

Inviting students and staff to reflect on and openly discuss the student learning experience is part of ongoing work for many universities. While there might be occasions when this may be considered a challenging issue, it is one that was dealt with transparently during the project. The project team was mindful of addressing any sensitivities at all stages and ensured that any information disseminated as part of the project did not compromise any member of staff or student. We also acknowledged that there was the possibility that some students might be entering a space of vulnerability by openly discussing their perceptions of their learning experiences with the academic staff teaching them, particularly if their perceptions include critique of the taught session. However, several steps were taken to minimise the likelihood of such vulnerability.

Firstly, in the introductory project briefing and as part of the participant training sessions, it was emphasised from the outset that the role of both student and staff participants was not to make evaluative judgements about staff performance during the observed sessions. Instead, the conversations, observations and reflections focused on making sense of the connections and intersections between learning and teaching on their programmes, with students' learning being the central priority and point of reference for both parties.

Secondly, there was a specific part of the project training that focused on the use of non-judgemental statements and questions in conversations for developmental learning. Participant observers were provided with a template to compile their notes of what they observed, along with associated questions and/or reflective comments to discuss during the professional dialogue stage rather than make evaluative judgements.

Thirdly, the project team established from the start of the project that trust between the participants was vital. Thus, throughout the project, the project team acted as a mediator at the beginning to facilitate dialogue and allow the participants to have time

and space to develop trust. The observation training had a primary focus on providing constructive, non-judgemental feedback and feed forward for participants across each case study.

The Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO) underpinning the project methodology comprised of six stages: pre-observation reflection, pre-observation discussion between students and staff, observation, post-observation reflection, post-observation discussion between participants, and a reflective write up. Throughout this process, there were several opportunities for the participants to feedback to the project team. This was especially important given the effectiveness of staff and students working together as co-reflectors, co-observers and co-researchers was a key part of the project's evaluation.

Data collection methods

The project adopted a qualitative, case study approach. Data collection was broadly separated into two phases/sets:

1. Institutional case studies – across different programmes/subject areas in each of the participating colleges. Each case study was identified and selected by the CBHE leads in consultation with academic staff. Participation in the project operated on a voluntary basis. On average, each case study consisted of two members of academic staff and two students, though numbers were higher or lower in some cases.



The project team collected a range of qualitative data in collaboration with the case study participants relating to their reflections and discussions on learning and teaching practices in their respective subject areas. This included written reflective accounts, observation notes, audio recorded collaborative discussions and verbal reflections between participants relating to their chosen area of focus of learning and teaching on their course.

2. Project evaluation – This involved collecting data with participant staff and students relating to their experience of actively participating in the cycle of collaborative observation (CoCO). Data were collected via a series of online focus groups, which were recorded on MS Teams. The project evaluation focused on the impact of CoCO on the learning and teaching practices and experiences of participants, lessons learnt about perceptions of their student learning experience, and the extent to which student engagement in their learning experience had changed. It was made clear to all participants in the introductory project briefing and the training programme that the purpose of the focus groups was not to evaluate or make a judgement about the quality of any of the taught sessions but to explore the experiences of the participant staff and students in participating in CoCO as a process. The emphasis was also heavily on exploring the student learning experience.

Principles and Practice of the Cycle of Collaborative Observation

The Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO) is underpinned by the ethos that improving student learning requires teachers and students to develop a reciprocal, contextualised awareness and understanding of their teaching and learning and what it means to learn collaboratively in the context of their course. We define this as ‘classroom consciousness’ (Cui et al 2020, O’Leary and Cui 2023), which builds on Bowden and Marton’s (2004) notion of ‘collective consciousness’.

Much of the inspiration and conceptual underpinning for the development of CoCO came from the Cycle of Peer Observation (CoPO) originally developed by O’Leary and Savage (2020). In addition, Bowden and Marton’s work (2004) contributed to the conceptual and theoretical underpinning of CoCO. In their work, they argue for an understanding between students and staff that is based on a common frame of reference of learning and teaching as fundamental to building a *collective consciousness* of learning in the context of a programme of study:

Learning from other people means that we become aware of their ways of seeing things, regardless of whether or not we are convinced by, or appropriate, their ways of seeing... this means that not only do students have to learn from teachers, but teachers have to learn from students as well ... Our views of a certain phenomenon can therefore be shared or they can be complementary. Combining differing views implies richer, more powerful, ways of understanding a phenomenon or a situation and is likely to offer more options for handling varying conditions (Bowden and Marton 2004, 14 -15).

This concept shares the critical social constructivist stand we adopted throughout this project, emphasising how teaching and learning should be built on an ethos that challenges our taken-for-granted views and practices to develop new understandings. As the college case studies illustrate, viewing subject specialist learning through the eyes of others enables us to develop a mutual awareness and understanding, which in turn helps us to appreciate, challenge and further our individual and collective understanding. Teaching and learning are social practices that require the protagonists to engage in a process of reflexivity. Examining our own understanding and experience of teaching and learning by cross referencing these assumptions and opening them up to dialogic exchange enables us to become aware of the strengths and areas for development in our practices. Instead of disseminating feedback to each other about teaching and learning, we argue that by creating shared spaces in which teachers and students can engage in reflexive dialogue, this leads to collective sense making (Fielding 2004), as exemplified by the case studies involved in this project.

The other theoretical tool used in the development of CoCO is Brookfield’s (1995) work on the critically reflective practitioner. To challenge the hegemonic assumptions that we hold about teaching and learning, Brookfield (1995) argues that it is important to draw on both our peers’ and our students’ perspectives to illuminate different interpretations of our actions and provide different frames of reference to understand them. According to Brookfield (1995), student learning is one of four key lenses through which teachers

are encouraged to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching. In CoCO, students and staff all take an active role in critically reflecting on their practices, viewing the shared classroom experience from their perspectives and exchanging their observations and reflections with each other. Our methodology draws individual perspectives together to observe learning and teaching at a course-specific level rather than focusing attention on an individual's practice or a one-off session. Central to our philosophy of improving learning and teaching is the need for students and teaching staff to take shared responsibility for developing mutual understanding, using a shared frame of reference from which to generate new understandings of situated learning and teaching.

Bringing students and staff together to collaboratively observe, reflect and investigate their learning and teaching requires careful ethical considerations. As well as following ethical research procedures and practices, and ensuring ethical consent was gained from each participant, our project paid special attention to the ethics of student-staff working relationships, the potential impact on participating staff and students, along with the impact between participants and their peers on the course. Trust between the participants was vital. It was important for the students to recognise this was not an exercise in gathering feedback and evaluating staff performance. Instead, the conversations, observations and reflections were focused on making sense of the connections and intersections between learning and teaching experiences on their courses, particularly in relation to the project's central theme of pathways and transitions into and through CBHE study. An aspect of the training sessions focused on the use of non-judgemental statements and questions in conversations for developmental learning. It was important for us to ensure that the participants had ownership of the work and were able to select the focus in their respective case studies. This included the power to decide which aspect(s) of learning and teaching they wished to focus on. We were keen to avoid any prescriptive and/or one-size-fits-all approach, as these contradicted the underpinning principles of CoCO and could potentially jeopardise the opportunities for reciprocal learning between staff and students.

The relationship between participating staff and students and the rest of the students on the course was a factor that required careful thought and sensitive handling. Staff were required to communicate the project, key findings and any actions from the project to their colleagues and their students to ensure transparency. Students were also responsible for ensuring that their work did not compromise any member of staff or peer on their course. So, for example, when reporting their observation notes, staff and students were required to keep the identities of their students/peers anonymous and focus on the aspects of learning and teaching that they observed rather than the individuals.

Project training and resources

As part of the project induction, staff and student participants from all five colleges attended an all-day training event at Birmingham City University towards the start of the project, delivered by the BCU project team. The event also included project briefings for all participants.

The project started with us reconceptualising and reconfiguring the way in which we planned for the participants to engage with observation as a method for inquiring into and enhancing the student learning experience. Like CoPO, severing the umbilical link between observation and its use as a method of assessing teaching and teacher performance was central to the process we undertook in the creation of CoCO and the training and preparation of the project participants. We were convinced that unless we were able to remove observation from the assessment context, this would jeopardise our efforts to capture situated examples of authentic teaching and learning and in turn to create a safe, trusting and collaborative environment for reflection and dialogue between staff and students.

When it came to student involvement, our approach put student voice and their active involvement in informing and shaping learning and teaching at the heart of this practice, thus reconceptualising students as members of their CBHE learning and teaching community. Without assuming students and/or staff were experts of learning and teaching, we decided that the best way to embark on meaningful and sustainable improvements was thus to build a shared understanding of learning and teaching between them in the context of their respective courses. Throughout the training, participants worked collaboratively on a range of immersive exercises to facilitate their familiarisation with the methodology and the activities involved.

While the training sessions were aimed collectively at both staff and students, there were elements that were targeted specifically at students. For example, helping them to think about their position as students through the lens of learning, to reflect on how they engage with learning and teaching, and how that connects to their knowledge and experience as a student on their course transitioning into and through CBHE study. Exercises were included on reflecting on learning experiences, learning about the role of observation in understanding learning and teaching and practising classroom observation as a method. The training materials also outlined the different stages of CoCO, explaining and providing examples of the student observers' roles and responsibilities at each stage of the cycle.

The accompanying [training guide](#) provides a rich bank of resources, with illustrative examples for those who are interested in implementing CoCO in their own courses, without being prescriptive to the particular methodology and methods that we adopted.

College Case Studies

The next section of this report presents a series of institutional case study summaries from each of the participating colleges. Each case study starts with a brief introduction to the institutional context, along with the courses and participants involved in the project. The substantive content of these summaries then presents the key areas of focus explored by the participants throughout the project, as well as the main learning outcomes.

Bishop Burton College and University Centre

College Context

Bishop Burton University Centre is located just outside Beverley in East Yorkshire. It is a rural campus located on 100 acres of land. Our students come from across the country. However, the majority are local within the Yorkshire and Humberside area. We have 350 HE students across 9 subject areas, with most of our students being commuter students, whilst some are in residential accommodation. We have Level 4 to Level 7 students with mainly 18–21-year-olds but some mature students especially on our distance learning provision, both full and part time, including two distance learning courses. A third of our students are neurodiverse and 70% of our students are female.



Participants

Case study 1

Animal Science Level 5 group Foundation Degree Animal Management and Behaviour. The student cohort was made up of Higher National Certificate progressors from Level 4 and Foundation Degree level 4 students. 14 students participated, along with 2 academic staff and 2 support staff members.

Case study 2

Sports Coaching Level 5 on the Bachelors in Sports Coaching/ Higher National Certificate. The student cohort was made up of 10 students, 1 academic member of staff and 1 support staff member.

Areas of Focus

Our QAA project idea was based on transitions and a scaffolding approach to academic support to help bridge the gap from Level 4 to 5. Higher National Certificate students at Level 4 study a criteria-based assessment similar to college Level 3 programmes, which is assessed differently and does not always prepare them for CBHE study. Developing independent, reflective learners is a central aim within HE, particularly at Level 5 where students are expected to demonstrate increasing academic autonomy and criticality. This outlines how the CoCO reflective model was implemented to support Level 5 students in improving their academic performance. Following participation in a series of three targeted academic skills workshops on critical reading and academic writing, staff and students chose to focus on the effective use of pre/post assessment feedback to help them to develop the necessary skills to support a successful transition to Level 5.

Key Focal Points for CoCO 1 and 2

The three academic skills workshops were designed to address key areas commonly associated with underperformance at this level: critical reading, academic writing, and effective use of feedback. While workshop attendance was strong and engagement was positive, it became clear that students required structured support to translate newly acquired skills into sustained improvements in their assessed work. To bridge this gap, the CoCO reflective model was used.

Three workshops were delivered in Cycle One relating to academic skills and the students were asked to reflect using the CoCO model. To enable a smooth transition into reflective practice, students were provided with a survey (facilitated via Microsoft Forms) using elements of the CoCO reflection. This built confidence in reflective practice and prepared them to use the model in its complete form for Cycle Two.

Engagement with the process was mixed for each case study, with different levels of feedback provided for the three workshops delivered for both the Animal Science case study group and the Sports Coaching group. This mixed engagement and the answers received may be linked to subject area and the student demographic. In our reflections, we noted that it would be more effective to focus on one subject-specific sample of students for future adaptations. This would allow for students to engage more critically with the content.



In preparation for Cycle Two and using the full reflective CoCO model, a workshop was held in the students' academic seminar to talk about focus groups and using the CoCO reflective model for reflecting on the approach to assessments in semester two, looking at pre-assessment support during the assessment process and on receiving and interpreting feedback. The students found it easy to use the CoCO approach, as they

were familiar with it from the simplified form from Cycle One. It also gave students confidence in the approach to reflection in Cycle Two, which was based around feedback and applying that to further study and assessments, which will further support transition to Level 6 and beyond. The students used the feedback and discussed how to apply it to future assignments to reassess their personal academic goals.

Key Outcomes and Learnings

Preliminary evaluation indicates a positive impact on student outcomes. Students demonstrated clearer assignment structure, more critical engagement with sources, and more effective responses to feedback in subsequent submissions. Additionally, students reported increased confidence in their academic abilities and a better understanding of how to approach more complex tasks. The feedback given by students shows they are feeling more prepared for the future and are already considering how this might change their university experience.

In conclusion, the integration of the CoCO reflective model provided an effective mechanism for consolidating learning from academic skills workshops. By guiding students through structured reflection, this supported the development of self-regulated learning practices that translated into improved academic performance for students. Students considered the feedback they were given as well as the grade. This approach highlights the value of combining skills instruction with reflective frameworks to foster deeper and more sustainable learning. It is undeniable that the self-reflection practiced through the structured CoCO framework has had a significant impact on the students' levels of confidence for the future.

Moving forward we intend to adopt the use of scaffolding academic workshops across all our provision to support our students transitioning from Level 4 to 5. As the students develop their academic skills, reading and applying feedback and reflective practice, this will undoubtedly improve their academic achievement and bridge the gaps. In the future, we will do this by delivering sessions to all Level 4 students in their first semester of CBHE. Also, we will ensure that students are included more widely in the process linked to assessment feedback and reflective practice, as well as in the development of future workshops and bespoke sessions. This will allow us to ensure the workshops and sessions delivered are tailored to the students' needs, ensuring positive outcomes.

Derby College Group

College Context

Derby College Group (DCG) is a large further education provider located in Derbyshire, delivering higher education (HE) provision across multiple campuses. The college offers an integrated curriculum spanning Levels 1 to 7, which establishes clear progression routes into HE and provides a locally accessible alternative to traditional university pathways. This model particularly supports students who may be underrepresented in HE, enabling progression within a familiar and supportive environment.

The HE provision at DCG is characterised by its strong vocational focus and commitment to widening participation. Approximately 60% of the HE student population comes from disadvantaged or non-traditional backgrounds, including first-generation HE students and those progressing from vocational Level 3 qualifications. This demographic profile reinforces the importance of inclusive, transparent and scaffolded teaching approaches that address differing levels of academic preparedness and supports successful transition into HE. Transition support facilitates successful engagement with HE.



DCG currently delivers HE provision to approximately 429 students across different pathways, including Criminal Justice and Offender Management, Sports Coaching Performance and Education, Engineering, Professional Construction, Animal and Zoo Management, Equine Science, Software Development, and Teacher Training. The HE provision is delivered in partnership with validating bodies including the University of Derby, Sheffield Hallam University, and Pearson.

However, the nature of CBHE presents several challenges. Students often enter HE with limited prior exposure to academic writing conventions and expectations, which can negatively affect confidence and attainment. In addition, many students experience significant anxiety related to assessment and classroom participation, alongside variability in digital literacy skills and independent learning readiness (Nurkamto *et al.*, 2024; Xu *et al.*, 2025; Chen, 2025).

These challenges highlight the importance of making academic expectations explicit and embedding structured support within teaching practices. In response, DCG has prioritised innovative and collaborative pedagogical approaches to support flexible pathways and effective transitions. This project has brought to light how effective transitions promote confidence, belonging and academic success among an increasingly diverse HE student cohort.

Participants

The project was delivered through a collaborative partnership between DCG and BCU, as part of a QAA-led initiative focused on enhancing flexible pathways and transitions in CBHE. The partnership brought together staff and students as equal contributors to the development and evaluation of teaching and learning practices. This approach reflects sector-wide recognition of student partnership as a mechanism for enhancing engagement, belonging, and learning gain in HE (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014; QAA, 2018).

Staff participants included Chrissie Draper, Higher Education Advanced Teacher Practitioner and Programme Leader for Criminal Justice (DCG Lead); supported by Chris Sadler, Advanced Teacher Practitioner and Programme Leader for Sports Coaching Performance and Education; and Ella Whitehead and Mariyah Khan, Higher Education Academic Coaches. All staff members were actively involved in the design, delivery, and evaluation of curriculum activities and engaged in reflective practice throughout the project.

Student participants comprised students transitioning from Level 4 to 5 from the Foundation Degrees in Criminal Justice and Sports Coaching Performance and Education. Students were positioned as co-designers and evaluators of their learning experiences, contributing through peer observation, collaborative learning activities, and reflective discussions. This participatory approach ensured that authentic student voice informed both the development and evaluation of teaching practices, strengthening the relevance and impact of the project

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Areas of Focus

The project aimed to explore how collaborative, student-centred pedagogical approaches can enhance flexible learning pathways and support effective transitions into CBHE. The initial focus centered on transition and skills development, using collaborative planning as a mechanism to identify and address student needs. This direction was shaped by staff reflections, student feedback, and institutional priorities linked to access and participation.

Early project activities, including annotated work, tutorials and student presentations highlighted key challenges, particularly in relation to students' awareness of their own academic strengths and weaknesses. These insights prompted a shift in focus towards examining how barriers to success in HE can be reduced, with greater emphasis on supporting students to recognise and develop their academic capabilities. This included a more explicit focus on helping students interpret assessment criteria and understand expectations associated with higher-level study. Without targeted intervention, these challenges risk reinforcing existing attainment gaps for vocational and non-traditional students in CBHE.

A central issue identified was the difficulty many students experience when transitioning into HE, particularly in relation to engagement, confidence, and understanding academic expectations. In response, the project evolved to prioritise the development of student confidence and a sense of belonging, alongside the enhancement of academic competencies, particularly academic writing and assessment literacy. This shift reflects the interrelationship between affective factors (such as confidence and belonging) and cognitive development, both of which are essential for successful progression within higher education.

Key Focal Points for CoCO 1 and 2

The purpose of CoCO was to amplify student voice and position students as co-designers of their HE experiences. Initial collaborative planning meetings marked the beginning of a culture of collaboration, which led to a positive shift towards students actively contributing to the design of classroom activities, rather than this being the sole responsibility of the teacher. What was most striking was that this approach not only empowered both students and staff to co-create meaningful insights but also informed the development of teaching practices and enhanced the overall learning experience. This aligns with wider HE principles that emphasise transparency, student engagement and the co-construction of learning to support successful transition into higher education.

The first cycle (CoCO 1) focused on student engagement and confidence at Level 4 through student-led activities. These included the completion of an interactive essay plan and the use of digital tools to support peer observation of coaching practices. Although students initially demonstrated high levels of anxiety, increased participation over time led to improved confidence, communication skills and engagement. This responds to wider challenges faced by students transitioning from FE to HE, where unfamiliar assessment expectations often contribute to uncertainty and reduced confidence.

The second cycle (CoCO 2) focused on academic competency at Level 5 within Criminal Justice through the introduction of the Super Seven Academic Competency Framework as shown in Figure 2. This framework was embedded through structured workshops and a Dragon's Den-style assessment, which supported the development of academic writing and helped reduce assessment anxiety. The framework provided a structured scaffold to support higher-order academic skills, including critical thinking and use of evidence. In parallel, Level 5 Sports Coaching Performance and Education students engaged in a series of scaffolded rubric-based learning activities. Initially, students critically annotated assessment rubrics, identifying issues such as lack of clarity, over-generalisation, and unclear grade boundaries. Students also highlighted the need for clearer examples, reinforcing how vague terminology can limit understanding of expectations. This was followed by an embedded, experiential classroom task where students and tutors collaboratively unpacked rubric criteria, explored distinctions

between grade levels, and co-constructed high-level responses using structured approaches such as PEEL.

The shift between cycles reflects progression from confidence-building to academic development.

Findings from the completion of the two CoCO cycles indicate that collaborative learning not only strengthens subject knowledge but also develops transferable skills, such as communication and teamwork, essential for employability. Future iterations of the project could refine the approach by reducing the number of presentations per session to allow for deeper discussion and more detailed feedback, thereby maximising the pedagogical benefits of reflective dialogue.

The integration of CoCO tasks across learning activities was associated with a substantial increase in student attainment for Sports Coaching Performance and Education students, with Distinction outcomes rising from 18.2% to 66.7%, and 100% of students achieving a Merit or above. Similarly, in Level 5 Criminal Justice, participation in CoCO corresponded with a 10% increase in overall grades.

Beyond the classroom, collaboration has also proven vital for addressing systemic challenges. This initiative, involving DCG staff and students, reflects a broader trend towards networked models of provision that transcend institutional silos. By pooling expertise and resources, the project represents an initial step towards the development of a more coherent framework that will benefit current and future students navigating the complex CBHE educational landscapes.

Furthermore, this experience has provided opportunities for HE teaching staff to raise awareness of the complexities associated with supporting students transitioning into non-traditional higher education pathways, while also contributing to scholarly outputs and enhancing professional development.

Key Outcomes and Learnings

The project resulted in increased student confidence, improved communication and digital skills, and a stronger sense of belonging. Academic outcomes also showed improvements, particularly in relation to academic writing and critical thinking, alongside a reduction in assessment-related anxiety. Students also demonstrated increased assessment literacy, including a clearer ability to interpret grading criteria and apply these expectations when constructing academic work.

For staff, the project encouraged a shift towards more facilitative and student-centred teaching approaches, supported reflective practice, and reinforced the importance of student voice. At an institutional level, the project contributed to the development of more inclusive and flexible teaching strategies aligned with widening participation priorities.



Figure 2 – Super Seven Academic Competency Framework

Key learnings from the project include the importance of confidence as a foundational element for student success, the value of student partnership in enhancing engagement and learning, and the effectiveness of structured academic frameworks in supporting transition and progression. Additionally, the project highlighted the importance of explicitly teaching and embedding rubrics within classroom practice, rather than treating them as static assessment documents. Reinforcing the role of rubrics as active learning tools that support transparency, engagement, and improving student outcomes when integrated meaningfully into teaching and learning. Future iterations of the project could be strengthened by allowing more time for reflection and by providing additional support to help students articulate the relevance of research within their academic work.

Collaboration among students, staff and institutions emerged as essential, not just as a pedagogical strategy, but as a cultural shift. This transformation has the potential to create lasting impact for widening participation students by repositioning assessment and learning as a shared, dialogic learning process that fosters clarity, confidence and academic agency.

Nottingham College

College Context

Nottingham College is one of the largest FE colleges in the country, offering a broad range of courses across six campuses. Our HE provision is relatively small, with approximately 400 learners. Our partners are The Open University (OU), Nottingham Trent University (NTU), Pearson and the University of Derby. We also offer Higher Apprenticeships at Level 4 and 5 and actively encourage widening participation in HE in a city that faces fundamental challenges, offering opportunities for those often excluded from Higher Education.



Participants

Students from across a range of courses participated in the project. Chelsea Wright and Kitty Allsop, now year 2 students on the Dance and Education course, progressed internally from Level 3 Dance. Arina Teplynska, who studied on Level 3 Musical Theatre, is now studying Acting. Jack Dawes, one of our mature students, and Jack Whittingham are currently in year 2, studying Film and Media.

Staff involved in Cycle 1 were: Nicola Burt (course lead for BA Hons Dance and Education), Rob Hitchen (course lead for Film and Media Studies), Heidi Hanes (course lead for Forensic Science) and Perry Hill-Wood (course lead for Applied Education Studies).

Some changes were made for the second cycle due to staff changes and student withdrawals. However, we welcomed new participants, who brought another dynamic to the group. They were; Sofia Butt and Carl Reast, currently year 2 students studying Forensic Science under the guidance of tutor Heidi Hanes. We also welcomed two new staff members: Andy Oakley (Technical Coordinator and Lecturer) and Richard Johnson (Year 2 course lead Film and Media), both of whom support the two Jacks.

Areas of Focus

During the project induction and training day, we talked openly about how students transitioned from FE Level 3 to HE Levels 4 and above. There were similarities across the 5 colleges and good practice was shared. Students were very open and honest and this first meeting gave them the opportunity to consider our focus for the project.

Our first staff meeting was held a few weeks after our initial visit to BCU in May 2025. As staff across the provision were approaching assessment periods, assessment was identified as the most appropriate focus for the first cycle of the project. The group aimed to investigate key areas relating to differing approaches to assessment and assessment practice through collaborative observation of teaching and assessment activities.

The intentions of the project were to strengthen and support transitions between FE and HE, improve student awareness of teaching and assessment practices, and to encourage greater awareness of assessment expectations.

A key aspect of the project involved organising opportunities for staff to observe one another's practice, alongside dedicated time for professional discussion before, during and after assessment activities involving students in Case Study 1 and again in Case study 2. The same applied to the students who observed their peers within an assessment environment, reflecting upon their thoughts and feelings before, during and after the observation. This enabled reflection on assessment methods, student engagement and expectations across FE and HE contexts.

Key Outcomes and Learnings from Cycle 1

The findings from Cycle 1 identified several recurring themes across learner performance, assessment engagement and collaborative practice. Overall, students demonstrated strong levels of preparation prior to assessment activities, suggesting that they were able to engage effectively with assessment criteria and expectations. In addition, teamwork and collaborative working practices were consistently observed as strengths, contributing positively to learner confidence and task completion.

A further finding related to the distinction between practical and written assessments. Learners appeared to perform more confidently and effectively within practical assessment contexts, where applied skills, communication and collaborative interaction were central to the assessment process. Written assessments, by

comparison, revealed greater variability in learner confidence and performance. Reflective analysis of the first cycle highlighted the importance of organisation and structure within the assessment environment.

Key Outcomes and Learnings from Cycle 2

With the transition of staff and students into Cycle 2, we elected to maintain a strong focus on assessment practices while continuing our observations with greater rigour. As a result, several students independently chose to observe not only their peers but also other disciplines. Cycle 2 adopted a more individualised and reflective approach by examining students' personal experiences and reflections in greater depth. This provided broader insight into learner engagement, assessment delivery and disciplinary differences across subject areas.

Cycle 2 provided a richer and more meaningful experience for both staff and students, generating deeper insights to inform reflection and discussion during our meetings. For staff, it offered a valuable opportunity to further evaluate pedagogical approaches, collaborative practices and the effectiveness of scaffolded learning in fostering student independence and engagement. For students, Cycle 2 enabled them to consolidate their understanding of assessment processes while recognising a gradual shift in their role as learners. A key aspect of this transition was the increased level of autonomy they exercised in decision-making, helping them become more aware of the growing expectations for independent learning as they progress into their final year of study.

Observations from dance student Chelsea Wright highlighted the importance of collaborative learning practices within performance-based assessment. A key highlight for her was based on having collaborative reflection opportunities, making feedback more detailed and constructive. These findings suggest that peer-supported assessment environments can enhance reflective practice and encourage active participation in creative disciplines.

Reflections from acting student Arina Teplynska emphasised learner autonomy and professional behaviours within assessment settings. Key observations included independent preparation and self-sufficient approaches to learning. This indicates that transparent assessment expectations and industry-aligned practices may encourage greater learner independence and professional readiness.

Students from Film and Media, Jack Dawes and Jack Whittingham, identified the significance of personalised feedback and mentoring approaches. Their reflections focused on one-to-one feedback sessions and industry-style mentoring approaches. These findings suggest that individualised tutor support and professional-style mentoring can strengthen student confidence, communication, and engagement with assessment processes.

Reflections from forensic science students Sofia Butt and Carl Reast indicated that their assessments were perceived as less holistic when compared with other subject

areas. However, students positively identified several aspects of the assessment environment that can improve their experience: Calm and structured assessment conditions and strong tutor-student interaction. This suggests that highly structured environments may support learner focus and professionalism, although opportunities may exist to develop more holistic or integrative assessment approaches.



Overall Discussion

Across both cycles, several consistent themes emerged regarding effective assessment practice. Structured environments, clear expectations, and strong tutor or peer support was repeatedly associated with positive learner engagement and confidence. Furthermore, industry-relevant approaches, collaborative reflection and personalised feedback appeared to enhance student ownership of learning and professional development.

The findings also demonstrated that assessment experiences vary according to discipline-specific pedagogical approaches. Performance-based subjects benefited from collaborative and reflective assessment models, while more technical disciplines emphasised structure, professionalism, and tutor guidance.

Personally, the student involvement was key. As staff, we plan and write our documentation around, and for our students. Their input into the assessment process should be acknowledged more and this project has allowed me to see how important

that is. Moving forward, everything we have gained from this project will help to inform future assessment design by encouraging a balance between structure, autonomy, collaboration and holistic evaluation practices. The comments below from two members of staff capture the value of the project:

“Overall, the observation was highly informative: it demonstrated that strong organisation doesn’t just support task completion, it shapes the very dynamics of group management and practice. By stepping back and allowing the students to lead, I gained a richer appreciation of how structure and autonomy together drive professional growth and team performance”.

“The QAA project has provided a fantastic opportunity for our HE staff and students to engage in quality research with other colleges. It has helped enlighten us to the possibility of engaging students in more collaborative research across disciplines as well as the value of engaging students in the process of assessment. This understanding of assessment process at HE level allowed our students to better understand their own assessments and even improve grades. The project also helped to develop collaboration across the college”.

Solihull College and University Centre

College Context

Solihull College & University Centre is a large general FE College with a small Higher Education provision (circa 500 learners studying prescribed and non-prescribed HE courses, and higher apprenticeships). The higher education provision is a mixture of Higher Nationals, Foundation Degrees and Top-ups validated or franchised through Pearson and 3 partner universities. Our cohort is approximately a 50-50 split of under 21s, and mature learners, usually returning to education after a break, or studying a higher apprenticeship whilst working.



Participants

Case study 1

Four students from the Special Educational Needs, Disability and Inclusive Practice (SENDIP) Level 5 cohort participated in the project: Ellie Bell, Chancelle Green, Nicki Haycox and Kiara McGinley. All four are typical of the SCUC HE student demographic, being mature full-time students who combine their studies whilst working. In the case of our SENDIP students, they each work in the Special Education sector. Additionally, two members of staff also participated: Mark Harding, SENDIP Course Leader, and John Murray, HE Academic Skills Tutor.

Case study 2

Two staff members took part - Kirsten Letts (Course leader for the Foundation Degree in Animal Behaviour and Welfare) and Claudine Barnes (Head of HE and previously the course leader), and two students took part in the initial discussions. One student unfortunately had to leave the project for personal reasons, leaving Ryn Evans, a second-year student, flying the flag for the student voice. Ryn had previously voiced interest in pursuing teaching/lecturing as a career, and so was a good fit for the project, where students became observers and advisors.

Areas of Focus – Case study 1 (SENDIP)

Following our training day at BCU in May 2025, the group discussed potential topics to explore. From this it emerged that an area of particular interest was the assessment and feedback process. Our four student participants felt that the SENDIP group, and other HE students, would benefit from understanding more about the tutor's role in marking and grading student assignments. With this in mind, the group agreed on a central question to shape our area of focus: *How are assignment grades decided and how does that feed into the tutor's feedback comments?*

Key Focal Points for CoCO Cycle 1 (SENDIP)

Having decided on an area to focus on for the CoCO Cycle 1, the group agreed that the first Cycle should run at the start of the 2025-2026 academic year. It was also agreed that in the first session, Mark would provide an overview of the marking process, explaining how the marking criteria/grid is used and how that criteria fits into a wider national standard. Following this input, the whole class would then participate in a 'marking exercise'. The class was divided into small groups and John provided two short samples of student academic writing for the groups to discuss and decide on where each piece of writing 'belonged' within the marking grid.

In terms of the formation of the small groups, this was decided by the four student participants as they knew the students and they were also keen to encourage the students to work with others they perhaps had not previously worked with. Each student participant worked with one group, both participating in the activity and observing the group engagement. The four student participants felt that it was important to be actively involved in the activity rather than just observing as not participating could have been distracting in a small classroom environment.

Key Outcomes and Learnings from CoCO Cycle 1 (SENDIP)

During Mark's input part of the cycle there was a high level of discussion from the whole group and a genuine interest in the marking process. Students also seemed fully engaged with the small group activity and there was a real buzz of debate at each table.

It was clear that students appreciated the challenge faced by markers when areas such as criticality and argument development were not clearly present in the writing.

In our reflections of that cycle, it was felt that in future adaptations it would be better to use one longer and subject specific sample of student writing rather than two short non-subject specific samples. The decision to use two short extracts was out of the tutors' concern over class time; whilst the SENDIP students are full-time, they are only in college one day per week. Additionally, it was felt a more subject specific sample of writing would help students to engage more critically with the content. However, overall, Cycle 1 seemed to work very well. As one of the students commented:

“Understanding the marking criteria and how tutors use it helped me to see that feedback is structured around clear expectations, not personal criticism.” It was agreed that a similar activity should take place for each cohort early in the academic year.

Key Outcomes and Learnings from CoCO Cycle 2 (SENDIP)

For Cycle 2 we returned to the theme of assessment and feedback. However, this time the students worked individually reflecting on their feedback to a recently graded assignment. In the pre-cycle meeting it was decided that students would be encouraged to identify at least three positive points from the feedback and three areas for future development. This decision was based on the four student participants stating that there is a tendency to simply ‘look at the mark’ rather than the comments. During the Cycle 2 activity, others in the cohort made similar observations. Several reasons for this were put forward by the group ranging from *“not much can be done about it now”* to feeling confused and even *“overwhelmed”* by the tutor’s feedback. However, during the group discussion, it also emerged that not having the opportunity to reflect and discuss feedback also played a part in how students dealt with feedback.

The discussion and feedback from Cycle 2 was highly informative, particularly for the tutors. The reluctance for students to engage with feedback highlighted a serious gap in learning and teaching. In terms of the Cycle 2 activity, students welcomed the opportunity to reflect on and discuss their feedback. They felt it was a worthwhile activity and would be more beneficial earlier in the course. One student observed that: *“Rather than seeing it [feedback] as the end of an assignment, I now see it as a starting point for improvement and progression.”* As a result, the opportunity to do this will be embedded in future delivery across the different SENDIP cohorts.

Areas of Focus – Case study 2 (Animal Behaviour and Welfare)

Staff members have previously identified a disconnection between scores for satisfaction on assessment and feedback in the NSS and the value of feedback to learners. The teaching team frequently reported students not improving their marks by using assignment feedback, evidenced by recurring errors in work from the same students. These are often things that could be easily rectified if advice was actioned and could make a difference to overall marks. We decided that this project was a good

opportunity to explore why this is happening to help students engage with the feedback process and become more reflective learners.

Key Focal Points for CoCO Cycles 1 and 2 (Animal Behaviour and Welfare)

Staff discussed with learners how frustrated they get when they see the same repeated mistakes, despite providing what they perceived as clear feedback on how to improve/resolve an issue. Learners were keen to improve their grades and therefore we decided the first session should be around engaging with feedback i.e. how to and why it is important.

Building on the chapter in Race's (2007) study skills book, we utilised the SAGE acronym (Student self-appraisal, Assessment literacy, Goal-setting and Engagement), adapting the 'S' and 'G' templates for self-assessment and goal setting, to use in the session. Students were asked to identify patterns in feedback from 3 previous pieces of their work. Next, they were asked to reflect on what they do when receiving feedback, how they feel and whether they use it to improve future work - if not, why not? Naturally, discussions took place during completion of these tasks and this gave insight into previously unrealised anxiety around mark release day. They were then asked to set themselves goals for making better use of feedback.

Ryn, our student participant, helped to design the second session using the same paperwork as Cycle 1. The second session was originally planned as dedicated reflection time/error

when the assessment feedback was released. The project had evolved somewhat at this stage, as the intention was to have other staff members delivering and project participants as observers but we did go accidentally off-piste – with a successful outcome. A new member of staff was due to be releasing assessment marks in the session, and an hour of the session had been planned for 'reflection and correction'. However, the week prior this staff member had given one-to-one verbal feedback on the assessment (but no grade) to all group members who were present. This had proved to be incredibly valued by the learners, but three students had been absent the week before and therefore also needed this feedback before they could commence the 'reflect and correct' time. In the end, a similar session to the first was run, utilising the same paperwork but for a single assessment, and requesting a 'pledge' for what they would do on the next assignment based on feedback received. During the reflection and discussion, most students stated that they had not fully stuck to the goals they had set themselves in Cycle 1, though they reported feeling that that they now better understood how to use their feedback and the session had helped them.

Key Outcomes and Learnings from CoCO Cycles 1 and 2

- Students require more training than is currently offered to understand and engage with their feedback. Students feel this is best placed in Year 1

Flexible Pathways and Effective Transitions in College-Based Higher Education

- Collaborating with students gives insight into how feedback is best received, this may differ for different cohorts
- Goal setting may not be the best way to encourage engagement with feedback - reflection and discussion generated the most insights



This project has highlighted to us the importance of instilling good feedback engagement practices early in the student's journey, to ensure that they are equipped with the skills needed to understand expectations, to reduce release day anxiety and to support individuals to achieve their best possible outcome. Going forward we will integrate sessions into academic skills training and plan to standardise built-in time to discuss feedback with module tutors.

Walsall College

College Context

Walsall College is a large further-education college in the West Midlands, serving a diverse community in the Black Country. It offers a broad range of academic and vocational programmes from Entry Level to Level 6. The college has a growing portfolio of college-based higher education (CBHE) provision. The student population mirrors the demographics of the wider Walsall area, with a significant proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, first-generation HE learners and those with additional learning needs. Our students arrive with limited experience of HE environments and face real challenges in developing their confidence, academic identity and a sense of belonging within their programmes.

Walsall College Protective Services offers Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) in Public Services. These courses attract students with aspirations to work in policing, the armed forces, the fire service and other related careers. Often, our students are motivated by a desire to serve their communities but lack the academic self-belief or professional identity their ambitions require. The challenge of supporting these students, not just academically, but in terms of how they see themselves and their futures, became the central motivation for this research project.

Walsall College's contribution to this project represents a sustained, longitudinal commitment to understanding what belonging and professional identity actually look like in practice.



Participants

Staff Lead – Richard Jones is a Lecturer in Protective Services at Walsall College, committed to helping students reach their full potential, both academically and personally. Richard's interest in the relationship between belonging, confidence and academic success led him to initiate this co-constructed research project, placing student voice and experience at the heart of the inquiry. Richard has led both cycles of the project, designing the research tools, facilitating student meetings, and co-constructing the findings with participants.

Student Participants (Cycles 1 and 2)

The same four students participated in both Cycle 1 and Cycle 2. Their involvement across both cycles means their journeys could be tracked longitudinally, from first experiences of transition into HE through to a settled sense of belonging and professional identity. This continuity is one of the project's most significant methodological strengths.

Tyler Millard

Tyler began as a quiet, self-contained student with a clear goal of becoming a police officer. His defining Cycle 1 experiences included walking Hadrian's Wall, attending National Police Week in Washington DC and leading younger students on a college trip. By Cycle 2, Tyler had achieved his first distinction and described himself as "*confident and part of a team*".

Shania James

Shania arrived shy and quiet and a powerful desire to help others. The Washington DC trip reminded her of her motivations. She is now in Level 5 and is working steadily towards her goal of becoming a detective.

Lily May Wood

Lily arrived believing her dyslexia made her less capable than those around her. During Cycle 1, she discovered assistive tools, received targeted one-to-one support and began to find strategies that worked for her. Her goal is to become a detective or a criminologist.

Cameron Rhodes

Cameron joined a Level 4 cohort, knowing nobody, after turning down a university place to study at Walsall College. By Cycle 2, Cameron is confident and clear of their pathway: detective, master's degree, doctorate, being the first in their family to get there.

Areas of Focus

Across both cycles, the project explored three interconnected areas:

- **Transition and belonging:** What enables students' movement from uncertainty to confidence and from outsider to insider.
- **Identity development:** How students construct and revise their sense of self as learners and future professionals.
- **Experiential learning:** The role of experiences beyond the classroom in accelerating both belonging and professional identity.

Key Focal Points for CoCO Cycles 1 and 2

Cycle 1 - Transition, Confidence and Independence

Cycle 1 was built on existing survey data: 100% of students agreed that educational trips enhanced their understanding and 75% reported measurable gains in confidence. These findings are not a conclusion, but a starting point, inviting the four students to become co-researchers in exploring what those numbers meant in their lives.

Four-meeting structure

- Meeting 1 - Students mapped their educational journeys from Level 3 to Level 4/5, identifying turning points and moments of realisation
- Meeting 2 - Students reflected on their own survey responses and what had changed since
- Meeting 3 - "Students examined how their confidence had developed and what had driven it
- Meeting 4 - Students co-constructed their case study narratives and made recommendations

Key Cycle 1 Findings: - Experiential learning was consistently the most impactful element, for confidence, independence and professional possibility - Human relationships mattered more than academic content or formal support structures - Students who felt *seen* were significantly more likely to persist and progress - All four demonstrated that adversity, met with the right support, becomes motivation rather than a reason to leave - The data pointed to a deeper question, belonging and identity, which became the focus of Cycle 2

Cycle 2 — Belonging and Professional Identity

Cycle 2 moved from broad patterns to the texture of those patterns in the participants' individual lives. The same four students participated in the study at Level 5.

Four-meeting structure

- Meeting 1 - Students mapped their identity - who they were, who they are now, and what shaped the distance between those two points

Flexible Pathways and Effective Transitions in College-Based Higher Education

- Meeting 2 - Students examined the people, places and experiences that fostered or hindered genuine belonging
- Meeting 3 - Students reflected on how they saw themselves in their chosen careers and the qualities they had developed

Meeting 4 - “Writing Our Story” Students co-constructed their narratives and offered recommendations based on lived experience



Key Outcomes and Learnings

Five shared themes emerged consistently across the two cycles.

Theme 1: Experiences Beyond the Classroom Were Transformative

Every student identified at least one out-of-classroom experience as a defining moment that made their professional future feel real.

Washington DC was cited by Shania, Tyler and Lily as a turning point. Tyler: *“This trip reassured me that I can achieve my goals.”* Shania said, *“I felt happy and free. In the times I felt I belonged, I felt like myself.”* Lily proved she could manage genuine difficulty far from home.

In Cycle 2, Cameron’s K2 security training produced qualifications and a shift in self-belief: *“I am capable of a lot more than I think I am.”* Lily’s visit to Birmingham Airport Police Station made their future feel tangible: *“Yes, definitely - I can really see myself doing this.”*

Experiential learning is not a supplement to the curriculum. It is the mechanism through which students come to believe in their own futures.

Theme 2: Human Connection Was the Foundation of Belonging

In Cycle 1, tutors Richard and Stewart were named by Tyler as the relationships that made the difference. Shania's tutor supported her through her housing crisis. Cameron's tutors responded to bereavement with flexibility.

In Cycle 2, these relationships deepened. Lily: *"I feel like I belong wherever the people who care about me are. I genuinely believe that places are defined by the people you share them with."* Cameron: *"Just listen. Be that shoulder for them."* Tyler: *"Make sure students feel listened to and respected. Create safe spaces where people can talk."*

Theme 3: Resilience Was Discovered, Not Given

None of the four arrived knowing they were resilient. Each discovered it through difficulty, and through continuing when it would have been easier to stop.

Tyler: *"I have come a long way. The progress I have made is real and meaningful."*
Shania: *"This moment made me realise I can keep going and never give up - I am stronger than I thought I was."* Cameron: *"We have experienced a lot - the loss of our dad. But we don't let it hold us back. I want to make my dad proud."* Lily: *"I thought my dyslexia made me stupid and that I wouldn't get very far. My mind has been changed recently, and I can now look back at all of my work and see how far I have come."*

Theme 4: Professional Identity Grew from Lived Experience

All four arrived with a general sense of direction. That picture was built through real encounters with serving professionals. In Cycle 1, 100% of students felt that trips enhanced their understanding of their chosen profession. In Cycle 2, identity crystallised. Tyler's letter to his future self: *"I hope you are making a difference, helping people, and protecting your community. Always remember why you started."*

Theme 5: Belonging Was Ultimately About Being Seen

The moments of deepest belonging were moments of recognition - when a student was seen clearly and that clarity was reflected back to them.

Tyler: *"Finding the right people and environments can help me feel like I belong."* Lily, on receiving a strong grade: *"It made me feel like I belong here. It was a concrete reminder that I am capable, that I have earned my place."* Cameron, on the name badge - a small act that said simply, *you are seen here*: *"Just listen. Be accepting and don't judge, because you don't know what that person has gone through."*

Conclusion

Tyler Millard, Shania James, Lily May Wood and Cameron Rhodes participated across one full academic year. They are representative of exactly the kind of learner that CBHE exists to serve: determined, capable and in need of the right environment to discover what they can do. What this project has shown, is that the right environment is not primarily a matter of policy or structure, it is a matter of people and relationships.

Synopsis of Evaluation Findings across the Five Colleges

Over the two cycles of CoCO, the project team carried out independent evaluation via group discussions with each participating college case study team. The discussions focused on four key themes:

1. Each case study's approach to CoCO;
2. Key findings from students and staff on their chosen transition theme/practice;
3. How CoCO facilitated collaborative learning about transitions,
4. The impact and challenges of implementing CoCO.

Over the two cycles, the evaluation also focused on the development between Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 in relation to the areas of focus, participants' roles and responsibilities, students' active participation in the collaboration. This section outlines the key evaluation findings from these themes and discusses the impact and implications of CoCO and reflections on teaching and learning.

Key Findings from Cycle 1

Across the case studies, Cycle 1 focused on familiarising participants with the methodology and underpinning principles of CoCO. Scaffolded introductions were developed and implemented by several case studies. For example, Bishop Burton staff created a series of Microsoft Forms using the observation and reflection template provided by the project team to support step-by-step reflective notes from students pre- and post- observation. Walsall College staff developed a series of thematic meetings under the overall theme of "My Journey" to help students become comfortable with documenting their observation and reflection over Cycle 1. These scaffolding approaches were carefully considered by staff to suit their local contexts and students' needs. Across all case studies, staff members approached Cycle 1 as an 'introduction' to develop participants' understanding of this type of collaborative inquiry, to build their confidence, their reciprocal understanding of learning and teaching and to establish a safe forum among participants to openly discuss and reflect on their chosen theme.

Case studies also experimented with observation approaches based on their local contexts and needs (e.g. size of the class, observation focus, disciplinary culture and practice). For example, the SENDIP cohort at Solihull developed a collective approach where students led small groups to observe peer engagement with feedback criteria and transcripts, effectively "*putting yourself in the teacher's shoes*" to understand marking rubrics. Derby College Group utilised the structured three-stage model of pre-observation, observation, and post-observation meetings, where students agreed to 10-minute observation windows to ensure they could still "*take part in the lesson*" while capturing active learning tasks; Walsall College staff adapted CoCO into a "co-construct" model where students made observations on the collaborative meetings themselves, taking notes on the different opinions expressed by their peers to inform

their subsequent reflections. These varied methodologies were carefully selected by staff to foster an “*authentic*” and “*natural*” collaboration that was student focused.

Over Cycle 1, building collaborative relationships was a fundamental factor all case studies were mindful of. The collaboration principles of CoCO require staff and students to create a more equitable learning environment, which can challenge traditional power dynamics between staff and students, and in relation to transitions into CBHE, this relationship dynamic is also a key pedagogical focus the case studies were keen to inquire into. Staff participants focused on relational strategies that created open, accessible environments and pedagogical practices with students. Some of these changes might seem small, for example, adopting an “*open door*” approach, “*breakout spaces*” for informal discussions, but they were carefully considered by staff to establish a support system that enabled students to participate in activities that were perceived as “*daunting*”. The staff-student meetings were utilised for more reciprocal dialogues where both parties were able to share openly about their pedagogical intentions, designs, plans, learning experiences and outcomes. For example, Derby College Group used the model to facilitate students “*owning it together*” through co-created essay plans and presentations, which moved the pedagogical focus from purely “*demonstrating subject knowledge*” to the “*skills that they need to achieve*”. Walsall College used the scaffolded meetings to facilitate a deeper exploration of “*who am I becoming?*” and “*what shapes my belonging?*”, enabling students to see their past challenges as a “*strength to move forward*”; with the carefully designed peer learning groups, students at Walsall College felt they were really empowered “*to write down these experiences and what they mean*” and “*to share with others who care about it*”.

Across all case studies, Cycle 1 observation facilitated a lesson on co-reflection that empowered students to develop autonomy and professional identity. Discussions during the end of Cycle 1 evaluation clearly illustrated the impact such an approach had on learners and staff. At Solihull College, students noted that the collaborative approach helped to dismantle the perception of the tutor as a distant authority figure (a perception some students developed from school education). For instance, an Animal Welfare student reflected that the project enabled her to realise that “*this person is in a position of power that can help me and wants to help me*”. Staff at Solihull corroborated this shift, with Claudine (College Lead) observing that students appreciated being included and felt they were “*working as equals with us*”, a dynamic she hoped “*elevated the students... and self-perception*”. This was echoed by staff at Derby College Group, who commented that the collaborative process meant students were “*owning it together*”. Students like Luke shared that developing a “*more close relationship with ... teachers*” directly increased their confidence to seek help and share their learning experience more openly, which ultimately “*made (their) grade go up*” due to the changes implemented in the peer learning pedagogical approach as a result of the collaborative observation findings and reflections.

Key Findings from Cycle 2

Cycle 2 built on Cycle 1 by exploring deeper, student-led inquiries into the areas of thematic focus. This shift felt organic to participants, developing students' autonomy and confidence as they moved from Level 4 to Level 5 in their academic study. This is reflected in the significant ownership of the learning process students took across the case studies in Cycle 2.

A major focus of Cycle 2 was the transition toward student-led initiatives. At Nottingham College, students moved from observing staff-led sessions to conducting *"independent rehearsals"* with no tutor present, which acting students described as vital for *"preparing us... for year three"*. This shift enabled students to adopt mentoring roles for peer learning, use the collaborative principles and approaches they had developed from Cycle 1 and elsewhere in their programme. During the end of cycle discussion, the case study team confirmed that this approach to student mentoring would be implemented as a long-term practice as a key outcome from the project.

The case studies also built on their approaches and findings from Cycle 1 to further develop students' understanding about teaching and learning practices. In the SENDIP group at Solihull, students shifted from peer-marking anonymous transcripts in Cycle 1 assessment literacy practice to performing a *"purposeful"* reflection on their own marked assignments with peer and tutor feedback. This allowed students to step back and look at their work from the perspective of the marker and the learner, which they noted was *"very personal and very helpful"* in understanding how to improve. A student commented: *"as a student, you come to school, you do your lesson, you finish, you have the assignment and you go home during your own time, you sit there and do your assignment... you kind of question yourself, what is the teacher expecting? What is this expectation? And you have the marking grade, but it doesn't give you a full picture of what the teacher wants. During this cycle, we learnt about teacher's expectations, we learnt about how different teachers read your work differently, and suddenly you understand how these criteria are used when they assess your work.... Very helpful."*

Across all case studies, Cycle 2 facilitated a shift to co-constructed pedagogies. Several innovative approaches were developed and trialled (see previous section on case studies for details). Through authentic practice and open reflection, students were able to contribute to the design and implementation of these innovations. For example, at the Derby College Group, the team created a "Dragon's Den" style pitch where students were teaching each other writing and the students' feedback about their own experience of peer learning played a significant part in making sure there were opportunities for independent reflection as well as group discussions. Space was given for students to develop confidence and trust before sharing work with peers and feedback through non-judgemental inquiry.

A clear finding from Cycle 2 evaluation was the development of participants' pedagogical relationships, trust and their empathy towards themselves and each other. Across all case studies, the collaboration facilitated a deeper connection between

participants, allowing them to view themselves and others through a lens of compassion, professional equality and mutual support.

Students utilised the second cycle to reflect on their own journeys, making sense of their past experiences and turning them into a learning resource of professional development. In the Walsall College case study, students reflected on the theme *"Who am I becoming?"* which allowed them to acknowledge their own resilience. One student noted that the process helped them realise they *"can be a bit nicer to myself sometimes"* and stop judging their past as harshly. At Bishop Burton, the collaborative environment acted as a *"comfort blanket"*, enabling students to bring out skills they were unaware they possessed, as they had previously lacked the confidence to mobilise them. Such realisation has been a powerful source for students to trust their own judgement and decisions, as demonstrated in the discussion with students at Nottingham College (see findings above).

Cycle 2 also further developed the trust and relationship between students and staff, further building on from Cycle 1's work, where teachers were keen to move away from being a hierarchical authority towards a professional partnership with their students. What's most powerful from this cycle is the empathy and trust students came to realise and value about each other. The collaborative nature of CoCO and the carefully designed learning and reflective activities by staff fostered a sense of community where students felt safe to be vulnerable and supportive of one another. For example, Walsall College students learned that they were *"all on the same journey, but... all taking different paths,"* which fostered deep empathy for the diverse backgrounds of their peers. Tutors observed students showing *"real empathy... care and compassion"* for one another during intense discussions. These types of learning outcomes subsequently gave rise to new initiatives such as student mentoring for students and staff to consider for the future.

Implementing CoCo

The critical factor that enabled successful staff-student collaborations in teaching and learning was the reciprocal understanding they had built between them. Underpinning this reciprocal understanding were the pedagogical relationships they had formed.

Our project started with a training day that included most participating students and staff. One of the areas covered focused on the principles and application of CoCO. Students and staff also worked in their groups and shared their reflections on students' experience of transitions from Level 3 to Level 4 and the perspectives of staff participants on supporting transitions. The co-reflection, sharing and discussion enabled case study participants to identify pedagogical factors that matter to them from their perspectives and teaching and learning practices that they could potentially work on together during the project. In our previous projects, this training was delivered to staff and student groups separately. However, the evaluation finding from that project suggested this event was a crucial first step in starting to develop the staff-student

collaboration by creating a space for them to share their perspectives and experiences, and begin to build their shared understanding through the use of CoCO (O’Leary et al 2025).

During the initial training discussion, staff participants focused on factors that could impact on the successful implementation of CoCO at their colleges. Two aspects were identified by staff: 1) students’ reflective practice and 2) their flexibility in implementing the CoCO model. To facilitate the record keeping and reflective practice, the project team developed a reflective template, which students and staff familiarised themselves with. Staff discussed how the application of reflective practice in collaborative teaching and learning inquiries between students and staff is a new pedagogical approach in their local context. To achieve meaningful implementation of such approaches, further scaffolding of collaboration and reflective practice was required (see examples from case studies above).

Practical considerations were also identified as important factors for the successful implementation of CoCO. Participants’ availability and the timetabling of activities were key factors. For the duration of the project, student participants volunteered their time to take part mainly as an extra-curricular activity. Staff were mindful of this and how it potentially impacted on students’ other commitments both on their courses and externally. Across the case studies, a flexible approach was adopted where some case studies involved more than two students over the two cycles. Some students observed their own classes, some observed other subjects’ classes in other subject areas. This flexible approach ensured that while each case study team worked collaboratively to address their pedagogical areas of focus, it enabled inclusivity for students whose availability to participate was limited. For example, a couple of case studies had students change programme or withdraw from the project due to other commitments, but the flexible approach enabled each case study to continue their collaborative inquiry. In our previous projects, the selection of students and the representativeness of the voice in a large cohort has been a key consideration. In this project, all participating case studies had a smaller cohort (this was reflective of the size of CBHE provision) where the collaborative practice was able to be implemented with more students. The principle of focusing on co-observation, co-reflection and co-development of meaningful pedagogical practice and relationship at the course level rather than critiquing an individual’s behaviours is key here.

Conclusion and recommendations

Concluding comments

This Collaborative Enhancement Project has generated important insights into how flexible pathways and effective transitions can be supported within college-based higher education (CBHE) through structured student–staff collaboration. The findings demonstrate that approaches which actively position students as partners in learning and teaching provide a strong foundation for enhancing both the quality of the student experience and academic outcomes.

Across all participating colleges, the project identified that successful transition into and through CBHE is shaped by an interrelated set of academic and affective factors. These include students’ understanding of expectations, engagement with assessment and feedback, confidence in their academic abilities and sense of belonging within their learning community. The evidence indicates that these dimensions are mutually reinforcing and are most effectively supported through embedded, dialogic and relational approaches to teaching and learning.

The Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO) proved to be an effective enhancement framework for enabling these processes. Its structured yet flexible design supported participants to engage in shared reflection on learning and teaching practices, facilitating a shift from transactional models of feedback and observation towards collaborative, developmental dialogue. A consistent outcome across the case studies was the strengthening of pedagogical relationships, which in turn enabled more open communication, increased trust and greater levels of student engagement.

The project also highlights the value of context-sensitive implementation. While each case study addressed different aspects of transition (e.g. assessment literacy, feedback engagement, confidence building and professional identity), common principles were evident. These included the importance of clear and transparent expectations, scaffolded support for learning and opportunities for students to engage actively in reflecting on and shaping their learning experiences.

A key finding is that transitions should be understood as a sustained and developmental process. Support mechanisms are most effective when embedded across the student lifecycle, particularly at critical progression points. The project further demonstrates that practices such as collaborative reflection, engagement with feedback and peer-supported learning are most impactful when integrated within programmes rather than delivered as additional or standalone activities. The project evaluation also identified several considerations for implementation, including the need for careful scaffolding of collaborative practices, allocation of time for meaningful engagement and sensitivity to local contexts and student needs. Addressing these factors will be important in ensuring the longer-term sustainability and scalability of approaches such as CoCO.

Overall, the project provides a strong evidence base to support the continued development of student–staff partnership approaches within CBHE. It affirms the value

of collaborative, reflective and relationship-centred pedagogies in supporting effective transitions and enhancing learning and teaching.

Recommendations

Building on the project findings, the following recommendations are proposed to support enhancement of policy and practice in CBHE:

Embedding partnership and collaboration

- **Embed structured student–staff partnership approaches** within programme design and delivery, ensuring that students are engaged as authentic, active contributors to learning, teaching and assessment practices.
- **Adopt and adapt collaborative frameworks**, such as CoCO, to support ongoing dialogue and shared reflection at course level.

Supporting transition through curriculum design

- **Integrate transition support within the curriculum**, particularly at Levels 4 and 5, rather than relying on discrete or remedial interventions.
- **Provide scaffolded learning experiences** that progressively develop students' independence, academic confidence and criticality.

Enhancing assessment and feedback practices

- **Strengthen assessment literacy** by making expectations explicit and engaging students in the interpretation and application of assessment criteria.
- **Embed structured opportunities for feedback engagement**, enabling students to reflect on, discuss and apply feedback to future learning.
- **Use assessment as a site for dialogue**, supporting shared understanding between students and staff.

Promoting reflective and dialogic learning

- **Create regular opportunities for structured reflection**, supported by clear frameworks and guided activities.
- **Foster dialogic approaches to teaching and learning**, encouraging open, non-judgemental discussion of learning experiences.

Developing relational pedagogies

- **Prioritise the development of pedagogical relationships**, recognising their central role in supporting confidence, engagement and belonging.
- **Encourage inclusive and supportive learning environments** that enable students to participate fully and feel valued as members of the academic community.

Supporting staff practice and development

- **Provide targeted professional development** to support staff in facilitating collaborative and partnership-based approaches.
- **Encourage reflective teaching practices**, including engagement with student perspectives as a core component of enhancement.

Ensuring sustainable implementation

- **Allocate appropriate time and resource** to support collaborative activities and reflective practice.
- **Maintain flexibility in delivery**, enabling approaches to be adapted to different institutional and disciplinary contexts.
- **Plan for sustainability**, including embedding approaches within institutional strategies and quality processes.

Extending impact and sector engagement

- **Promote dissemination and sharing of practice** across CBHE providers to support wider sector enhancement.
- **Encourage further collaborative research and evaluation** to build the evidence base for effective transition practices.

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Glossary

BA	Bachelor of Arts
BCU	Birmingham City University
BSc	Bachelor of Science
CBHE	College Based Higher Education
CEP	Collaborative Enhancement Project
CoCO	Cycle of Collaborative Observations
CoPO	Cycle of Peer Observation
DCG	Derby College Group
FE	Further Education
FEC	Further Education College
HE	Higher Education
HNC	Higher National Certificate
HND	Higher National Diploma
NSS	National Student Survey
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education
SAGE	Student self-appraisal, Assessment literacy, Goal-setting and Engagement
SENDIP	Special Educational Needs, Disability and Inclusive Practice