

External evaluation of the Milton Keynes College Group Greater Than Network

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1. Executive Summary

This evaluation focuses on the Greater Than Network run by Milton Keynes College Group. Although the contract ran from Autumn 2022, the Network only really started in April 2023 when a dedicated Network Lead, Tom Redshaw, started in post. The Network was funded by the Department for Education (DfE) as part of a range of programmes intended to provide continuing professional development (CPD) to teachers and leaders of post-16 GCSE Maths and English resits. The funding was due to run from Autumn 2022 until March 2025, but DfE took the decision to cancel the contract in Autumn 2023 and so the Network closed in February 2024 when funding ceased.

Our evaluation, by researchers Charlyne Pullen and Sarah Boedt, both at Sheffield Hallam University, was designed to run for the length of the programme, and this was intended as an interim report. However, we have used information collected by Milton Keynes College Group as participant feedback on the Network, our discussions with the Network Lead and Principal of Milton Keynes College Group, and interviews with participants to evaluate the project for the time that it ran. Data on attendance and engagement collected by Milton Keynes College Group is also included.

The theory of change developed for the programme is set out below and highlights the importance of creating a network where individuals could create a community in which they felt they belonged. This was a crucial part of this CPD that distinguishes it from more traditional content-led CPD.

In terms of operations, the Network, once fully established in April 2023, worked well. It achieved targets around numbers of participating colleges (32 against a target of 30) and engaged individuals (690 against a target of 500). Participants provided positive feedback on the sessions delivered. Leads in member colleges reported that the programme would enable them to support classroom teachers to share their good practice. In time, this could have become a further developmental activity and a sustainable way to empower teachers.

Challenges experienced by the Network include the accounting requirements of the stipend leading to a change in process and the technology available, as security protocols made it difficult for potential users to access the Teams site. These challenges were exacerbated by the short time in which the Network was able to operate.

In conclusion, the Greater Than Network showed considerable promise, with many participants benefitting from the programme, either for themselves or for their team. Without the time available to continue operating, it is difficult to evidence the likely outcome for the whole period of the original contract, but the evidence we collected suggested it could have become a valuable addition to the post-16 CPD landscape.

2. Introduction and methodology

Since August 2014, learners who have failed to achieve a Grade C in GCSE English and/or maths by age 16 have been required to continue studying English and/or maths post-16 (DfE, 2014). Learners were required to continue their studies until they either achieved a Grade C at GCSE or reached 18, whichever came sooner. Rules have been amended over the past decade, to revise the 'pass' grade from C to 4 as new GCSEs were introduced, and to change the extent to which Functional Skills at Level 2 and other stepping stone qualifications are permitted within the condition of funding (DfE, 2024). The expectation that all students will achieve a suitable passing grade in a Level 2 English and/or maths qualification has created challenges both for the Further Education (FE) sector, where most of these learners study post-16, and for teachers of English and maths post-16.

Learners who leave 11-16 education without good grades in English or mathematics are more likely to continue their study in an FE organisation than in a school and these learners are often demotivated by their experiences in school (Anderson & Peart 2016). Success rates for those resitting a level 2 maths qualification remain stubbornly low. Recent data show that around 2/3 of those not achieving level 2 English and/or maths at 16, have still not achieved it by the age of 19 (DfE, 2022a).

In order to support teachers of English and maths resit learners, a range of approaches have been adopted by the Department for Education (DfE). A workforce strategy was developed (DfE, 2014) including a range of bursaries and incentives schemes to encourage maths graduates in particular to consider teaching in FE. More recently, most approaches to support these teachers have been focused on professional development commissioned firstly by the Education and Training Foundation, and in 2022, by the DfE directly (FE Week, 2022). The grant available from the DfE in June 2022 offered a range of providers the opportunity to deliver professional development for a period until March 2025.

The programme that forms the subject of this evaluation was developed by Milton Keynes College Group and became known as the Greater Than Network. It aimed to develop a network that would reach 40 colleges across four English regions. Professional development would be delivered mostly online, and as a network, many contributions were planned to be delivered by staff at member colleges. More information about the programme is in Section 3: Theory of Change.

2.1 Evaluation plan and methodology

This evaluation has been conducted by researchers at Sheffield Hallam University. The plan and methodology were to develop a theory of change, which is set out in Section 3, conduct interviews with up to 30 member colleges over the course of the programme, and review of surveys and other programme feedback collected by Milton Keynes College Group. We planned to produce an interim report in March 2024, and a final report in March 2025.

The evaluation sought to identify the success of the Network in terms of reach, satisfaction of participants, and learning, as well as any changes to practice as a result. It also aimed to establish any additional outcomes or impacts of the Network on participants, colleagues of participants, and learners. Through the evaluation of the Network, we also planned to identify any potential improvements or changes that could be made to increase the effectiveness and the impact of future programmes.

2.2 Early closure

The Greater Than Network was closed early by the DfE in February 2024. As a result, we have produced this final report setting out some of our initial findings from our evaluation, as well as the theory of change for the programme, and some conclusions and recommendations for future operations of similar programmes. The evaluation team comprised staff with significant experience in conducting and commissioning evaluations of professional development programmes, as well as individuals with direct experience of teaching and governing in FE colleges.

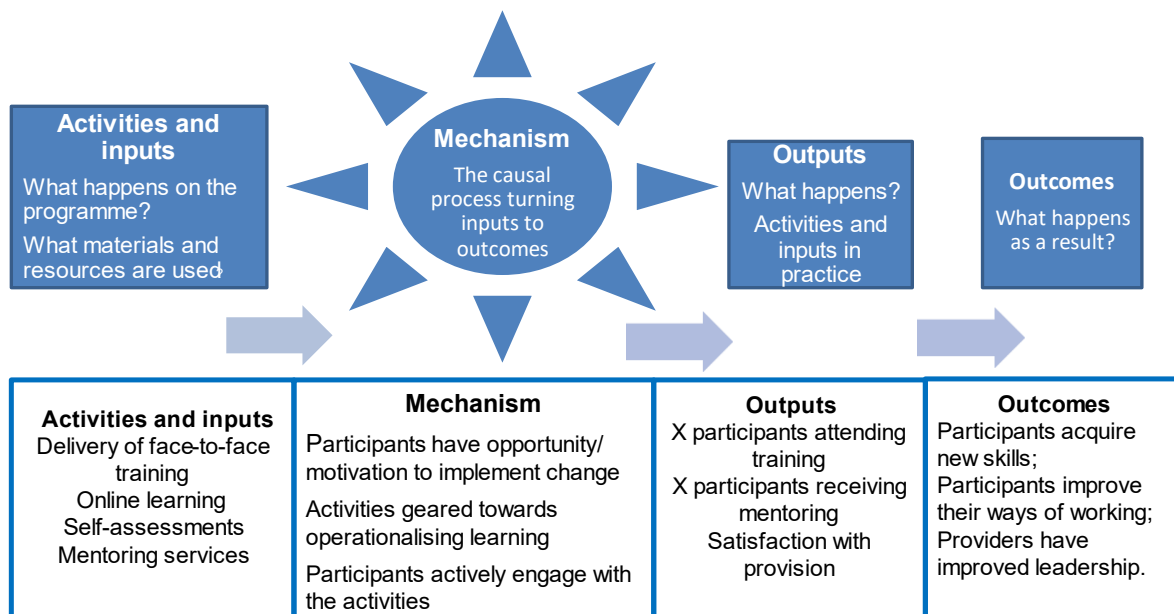
3. Theory of Change

This section sets out our theory of change for the Greater Than Network programme, starting with some background about the process, and then providing more detail about the programme. Aside from being a key part of the evaluation process, setting out this theory of change provides a deeper understanding of the intended aims, outcomes, and impacts of the programme. In the context of the programme’s early closure, we believe it is helpful to set these out.

3.1 Theories of Change

A theory of change is a method that explains how a given intervention, strategy, or actions are expected to lead to specific development change and achieve defined outcomes. ToC draws on causal analysis, based on evidence to explain why particular activities are expected to lead to particular outcomes (Reinholz & Andrews, 2020). The first part of the project was to develop the theory of change for the Greater Than Network programme, based on the Sheffield Hallam University theory of change model, as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: The Theory of Change model



To develop the theory of change model for the Greater than Network, we worked with the senior team at Milton Keynes College Group to fully understand the programme, and what it was aiming to achieve. We have set out below the aims and objectives, followed by the activities and mechanisms that were intended to meet those aims and objectives. Further, we established the intended outputs, outcomes and impacts for the programme. Although not all of these elements took place, and any impact would be observable beyond the life of the contract, we feel it is helpful to fully explain how the Greater than Network programme intended to make and demonstrate positive changes in the teaching and learning of English and maths GCSE resits to 16–18-year-olds.

3.2 Aims and objectives

The stated aims and objectives of the programme were to:

1. Provide quality, free CPD based on evidence of what works in the classroom to support positive progress, focusing on teachers having the skills and knowledge to support young people to make progress toward English and maths by the age of 19.
2. Increase the reach of targeted CPD accessed by 16-19 resit teaching staff in FE colleges.
3. Ensure CPD activities meet the needs of participants.

The original tender document issues by the DfE identified that it was aiming to commission programmes to improve the teaching and learning of GCSE English and maths resits. This document also set out three key outcomes, which closely align to the aims of the Greater than Network. These outcomes were:

1. *Continuing the positive trajectory of the CoF [Condition of Funding] Policy. This will be achieved by providing a free CPD offer for 16-19 GCSE/FSQ resit teachers in England, which is based on evidence and/or experience of what works in the classroom to help 16-19 GCSE/FSQ resit learners make positive progress and is focused on ensuring relevant teachers have the skills and knowledge to help even more young people progress towards their L2 English and maths by the age of 19.*
2. *Increasing the reach of targeted CPD accessed by 16-19 GCSE/FSQ resit teachers. This will be achieved by securing buy-in from FE providers and their managers to maximise the number of 16-19 GCSE/FSQ resit teachers engaging in CPD activities, with a particular focus on new entrants participating in CPD.*
3. *Ensuring the CPD activities meet participant teacher needs. This will be achieved by continually assessing and adapting the delivery approach, taking account of engagement success rates, participant teacher feedback and evidence of good practice. (DfE, 2022b, p18)*

The concept of creating a network, with a membership stipend, and a college lead who encourages other staff to participate, is at the heart of the Greater than Network programme. This network is the main activity and mechanism for achieving the aims and objectives.

3.3 Activities and mechanisms

3.3.1 Digital network

The original proposal put forward by Milton Keynes College Group set out how the aims and objectives in section 3.2 were to be achieved:

*To support the retention of skilled teaching professionals we will provide a ‘**Greater Than**’ **English and maths network/hub**, led by leaders and practitioners, for leaders and practitioners. We will provide a subject specific digital network which will support an online community of practice, building on the expertise of practitioners working across our regions. Remote CPD, synchronous webinar style sessions and an annual face to face conference will provide a supportive and specialist network. (MKCG, 2022, Executive Summary)*

The key activity for the Greater Than Network is therefore to create a digital network, enabling leaders and practitioners to share their expertise and learn from others. This network was

created as a Microsoft Teams site, building on the experience that Milton Keynes College Group has with the Microsoft Innovative Educator Expert community. Milton Keynes College Group is the lead organisation for the South-Central Institute of Technology, whose lead employer organisation is Microsoft, so they have a long-standing relationship.

The Microsoft Innovative Educator Expert community involves educators with particular expertise in using Microsoft products in an innovative way, who have to self-nominate and then be selected to become certified experts and part of the community. Once part of the community, individuals are expected to deliver presentations about the innovative way they use Microsoft for teaching and learning (Microsoft, 2024). As a result, this digital community enables practitioners and leaders to learn from each other.

When developing the bid to establish a network for post-16 English and maths CPD, Milton Keynes College Group intended to replicate some key elements of the Microsoft community. These included having a space for practitioners and leaders, enabling people at any level to present their effective practice, and maintaining a thriving digital community, all with some light moderation and quality assurance to ensure that effective practices were being discussed, but without putting off junior members.

3.3.2 Activities

The activities of the Greater Than Network were, as a result, intended to be:

- Online CPD delivery through the network. This included multiple components:
 - o Participants completed an online training needs analysis.
 - o A digital English and maths hub was established to create online communities of practice where members could participate in forums, with a portal to share resources and special interest channels.
 - o In addition, there were monthly webinars, linked to topic based CPD
 - o And opportunities for peer mentoring.
- The online activities were complemented by the annual conference which provided opportunities for face-to-face CPD.

The network is the foundation for the majority of the activities undertaken as part of this programme. In addition to the online and face-to-face CPD activities, it was planned that participants would be able to access mentoring services which would inspire them to further engage with the programme and take action to change their practice. The network and particularly the regular weekly sessions were intended to provide participants with opportunities to develop a strong external network to support further, sustainable development of their practice. The range of experience amongst network members would support the CPD offer and enable opportunities for peer mentoring.

3.3.3 Mechanisms

The mechanisms for the effective delivery of the Greater Than Network were identified in the theory of change process to sit within one of three categories. The three categories were:

1. Programme Design
2. Organisation (in this case the college which is a member of the network)
3. Individuals

For the programme design to be successful, a series of standard mechanisms were identified. These are mostly around ensuring that the training is relevant to the participants, available at the right time for participants and that it is well delivered and of high quality. Additionally, the

programme design needed to ensure that the right participants were engaged on the programme, typically through targeting individuals, or being clear in marketing materials about who the programme was aiming to support.

Organisation is a key mechanism for this programme, as it relies on college English and maths departments (or similar arrangement) to support individuals to participate and engage in the network. The programme has been designed to include a stipend paid to member colleges. The stipend was originally designed to provide a fixed amount to each member for the year, and the college or Network Lead (usually a Head of English and/or maths) would decide how to use it. The fixed amount was intended to be in the region of £3000 per year, although the actual amount to be distributed to each organisation depended on the number of members. The intention was that colleges who became network members earlier would receive more in the first year of membership because there were fewer members in total, but in each year, each member would receive the same amount.

The stipend was designed to be easily transferable to the members, via an annual invoice for however much the stipend was in that year. It was intended to require limited bureaucracy for the college, and so was a significant benefit for network members. Although they could use the funds to pay for additional CPD, the stipend was designed to provide cover for teachers and to enable participation in online forums and discussions. It could also be used for travel and subsistence expenses to enable leaders and practitioners to attend the face-to-face events. Broad guidance was provided, but network leads had autonomy over how to spend the funds internally.

The last set of mechanisms to enable the successful delivery of the CPD was for individuals. As a template for changing behaviour, programme designers and evaluators often use the COM-B framework which establishes that individuals must have the capability (C), opportunity (O), and motivation (M), to change their behaviour (B). This programme aligns with the COM-B framework by enabling individuals to have the opportunity to participate as a result of the stipend and organisational engagement. If the participants are the right participants, and are appropriately targeted by the marketing as set out in the programme design mechanism, then they have the capability to make changes.

The successful implementation of the programme also relies on participants being motivated, so they are actively participating in the network, and keen to learn about new ways of teaching maths and English to post-16 learners. Participants also should be inspired to take action and change their practice. In this way, individuals should cover all the aspects of the COM-B framework and be enabled by the programme to change their behaviour.

3.4 Outputs, outcomes and impacts

The Greater than Network had a series of outputs, outcomes and impacts. The outputs were specific targets set for the end of the contract, while the outcomes and impacts were developed from the initial bid put together by Milton Keynes College Group and as part of the theory of change process.

3.4.1 Outputs

The expected outputs for the end of year 3 of the project were that:

- 40 colleges and 500 participants will have engaged.
- Online network: 500 teaching staff and 85% of possible participants within each member college will have engaged with the network.
- In person CPD: 3 annual conferences with a total of 500 attendees.

The intermediate targets were also related to events and network member colleges. These were expected to increase during the length of the programme, so the first-year targets were for 20 colleges to be members, 1 annual conference and monthly webinars to be held.

3.4.2 Expected outcomes

As a result of engaging with the Greater Than Network programme, the intention was that teachers of maths and English resits would have developed their pedagogy and improved their teaching skills. They would also have access to a bank of good quality resources. Additionally, participants would have developed a strong external network which would improve their motivation to make changes to their practice. These outcomes combined were intended to lead to consistent and effective teaching approaches, subsequently impacting on 50,000 learners aged 16-19 studying English and maths.

These medium-term outcomes were categorised in the theory of change process into those for organisations, and those for individuals.

Table 1: Medium-term outcomes

| College or Department | Individuals | |
|---|---|---|
| Shared understanding of what good practice looks like | Participants have a strong external network | Teachers are more motivated |
| Stronger English and maths subject leadership | Participants are motivated to make changes | Participants have access to bank of resources |
| Subject leaders developing others | Participants change their practice | Teachers are more confident |
| College supports subject leaders | Participants develop and share their own practice | Participants belong to and feel part of a community |

Many of these outcomes are common to CPD programmes in general, except the idea of belonging to a community, which is distinct to the Greater Than Network. This was felt particularly strongly by the team at Milton Keynes College Group as a fundamental outcome of the programme.

3.4.3 Intended impacts

The longer-term outcomes, or impacts, of the programme are also organised by college or department, and individual. For the college or department, these were:

- English and maths results improve.
- Learners attend and engage better with English and maths.

The second of these is important and leads to the first. English and maths GCSE resit teachers often have challenges with attendance and engagement in lessons, as learners did not voluntarily choose to re-take their English and maths GCSEs and do not always appreciate

the reasons for doing so. As these are problems particularly experienced by English and maths GCSE resit teachers, a network providing CPD both to and from these teachers might be expected to provide a better understanding and more support than more general or less targeted CPD.

For individuals, there were a range of intended impacts:

- Teachers have a community of practice.
- Teaching practice and confidence improves.
- Teachers have greater support from subject leaders.
- Increased retention of English and maths teachers.
- Increased motivation of English and maths teachers.
- Teachers feel able to make a difference to learners.

As with the outcomes, having a community of practice over the longer term was important to the developers of the Greater Than Network. This requires an effective digital network, and strong relationships that endure beyond the life of the programme funding. It is not possible to assess the extent to which these outcomes and impacts have been met at this stage, but it is a question Milton Keynes College Group might consider returning to in future.

4. Operations and feedback

This chapter sets out the operations of the Greater Than Network until December 2023, the results from feedback surveys sent out by Milton Keynes College Group, and from interviews conducted by the Sheffield Hallam University evaluation team. As set out in the introduction, the evaluation plan involved conducting the majority of the interviews after March 2024, to allow time for the network to be operational. As a result, there are limited interviews to analyse.

4.1 Operations

The Greater Than Network contract began in Autumn 2022 but the full-time Greater Than Network Lead, a previous Head of English and maths in an FE college, started in April 2023. As a result, most of the functions of the Greater Than Network only fully started after April 2023. As explained above in the theory of change activities section, the Greater Than Network intended to be centred around an online community, monthly webinars, and annual conferences. So, the activities initially planned for spring/summer 2023 took place in that vein with 2 monthly CPD sessions online, one in April and one in May, then an annual face-to-face conference in June, followed by a half-day face-to-face CPD session in July.

However, it was felt that monthly sessions made it difficult to develop a community, so the network began to run weekly 'Friday Forum' sessions. These sessions took place online on Friday lunchtime for an hour or slightly longer, and could be adapted to incorporate timely issues, such as exam preparation, discussion of an exam paper, or how to address a sudden influx of students after the 2023 results were published. In some cases, Friday Forum meetings could also involve individuals from colleges presenting a specific element of their practice that they wanted to share. It was anticipated that this would happen more often later in the operation of the network.

Also, following high demand for the first full-day conference, which sold out of tickets, half-day face-to-face sessions were added to the calendar. These were led by the Greater Than Network Lead with space for individuals to present effective practice. In all cases, presentations by member colleges were lightly reviewed for quality assurance purposes, although the Network Lead was mindful not to place additional barriers that would discourage participation.

In addition to the planned activity, several colleges requested direct engagement from the network, whereby the Network Lead would visit and promote the network by delivering some content from a previous session and/or plan a future session for or by the college. 10 of these visits took place between April and December 2023, at different colleges covering all four regions in which the network planned to operate – London, the Southeast, the East, and the East Midlands.

In total, from April 2023 to January 2024, the following activities took place:

- 23 Friday Forum meetings online
- 5 online CPD sessions
- 1 full-day face-to-face conference
- 2 half-day face-to-face CPD events
- 2 college-based CPD sessions
- 10 college-based planning and promotions sessions

In total, 306 individuals attended at least one event or session, of whom 209 individuals were from member colleges and had engaged with the network. The CPD sessions had a total attendance of 350 and total attendance for all events was 690. Although not all unique attendees, these figures comfortably meet the intended outputs set out in section 3.4.1.

In terms of member colleges, the original intention was to have 30 member colleges by summer 2024. The Greater Than Network had 32 college members by December 2023, so exceeded this target.

4.2 Feedback

After each event, participants were sent short feedback forms by the Greater Than Network Lead. Feedback from events run by the Greater Than Network have mostly received positive feedback. For example, when asked how likely they were to implement ideas or approaches from the June conference, 94% of respondents (46 of 49) reported that they were somewhat or very likely to implement ideas or approaches from the conference. Similarly, considering responses from an in-house event, 95% of respondents (19 of 20) reported that that they were somewhat or very likely to implement ideas or approaches from the event.

These forms also asked individuals if they were planning to share any of the ideas or approaches from the event, and almost all participants reported that they would disseminate the approaches in team meetings or share them informally with colleagues. All online and some in-person sessions were recorded to enable this sharing.

The forms were also used to ask for ideas either for future sessions or topics to be covered. These were well-used, and the Network Lead was able to respond to requests, often for sessions focused on exams. It is clear from this feedback at the conference in particular, that the sessions were positively received, since when asked 'what would you like to see at future conferences', at least 5 of the 49 respondents simply responded 'similar' or 'more of the same'.

One element of some of the feedback was focused on the lack of tailoring for events. This applied to individuals who were seeking more English or more maths content because they were specialist teachers of these subjects. It also applied to leaders and managers, who struggled to find content specific to leadership and management. Other requests in the feedback were for more organised and structured networking, making sessions more interactive, and often for more time during sessions to enable practitioners to try out the techniques.

In general, the approach to feedback and formative learning through the process of running the network shows there was an appetite to be flexible and adapt by the Greater Than Network team. There was limited time to see these changes in practice unfortunately.

4.3 Interviews

As noted in the introduction to this section, it was very difficult to conduct the 10 interviews scheduled. More than 10 individuals were approached, and the initial timing after the conference was challenging as the conference was at the end of June. Two interviews took place in July and August. College leads were contacted again in the autumn, and fed back that the timing was again challenging since a lot of colleges found they had many more English and maths learners than anticipated as the grade boundaries for GCSE results in summer 2023 were revised down to 2019 levels. Some colleges saw a 50% increase in the number of English and maths learners with only a few weeks' notice, so class sizes increased, and, in some cases, college leads with no or limited teaching responsibilities found themselves having to teach GCSE resit classes. Despite chasing emails, we received little response, although a third interview took place in the autumn. In December 2023, we agreed with the Greater Than Network team to use part of a Friday Forum session as a kind of focus group to gather feedback. This took place prior to information about the closure of the Greater Than Network being available.

4.3.1 Network leads

The notion of a network lead for each college was intended to provide a regular contact for the Greater Than Network team and also an individual within each member college who would encourage their staff to participate. The college lead was responsible for deciding on the extent of participation in the network, for example through actively identifying individuals to attend certain events, playing recordings or using resources from sessions. The individuals who were interviewed were keen to engage their staff in the network and had plans for doing so. For example, one college lead identified how the internal process could work alongside the network in supporting staff development:

“I'd like to reach a situation where people in the organisation are confident to go and present and share on that one thing they've done... You know a really good teacher [may] have a very specific thing that they've done that they could showcase. We have our own internal sort of platforms for people to get up and do that usually at the end of a year but to get up and do that more broadly to a set of English teachers could be really good development for them.”

Another interviewee described how two elements of the network would work from their perspective. The first was about signposting content to the relevant individual:

“[My role is] disseminating the right training to the relevant person within my college. So, for example the next session is about technology and I've got an IT lead, so he was the guy I wanted to send on that.”

The second way that the network would be valuable to this college lead is for them to present good practice in place at their college. The interviewee said:

“There was a bit about the Nov resits last week and I actually delivered on that cos it's something I'm quite passionate about. ... it's about me leading and disseminating to the right people within my team.”

These differing views on how to use and engage with the network from two college leads show how participation can be tailored by the college lead to meet the needs of the organisation. Importantly, it also demonstrates the freedom the college lead has to make the network part of the existing staff development available in the college.

One of the challenges of the standard stipend and freedom is that some individuals who contribute a lot may feel some frustration towards those who do not contribute much. One of the interviewees described the situation from their perspective:

“It [the stipend] shouldn't be a one size fits all model, because if somebody's just signed up and then comes along and shakes the cap at the end of the year... that's just morally wrong compared to ... if I attend 90% of the time and I'm contributing and influencing people in the room, why am I getting the same? It's a little bit disheartened (sic) you know.”

However, the limited time of operation meant the situation described by the interviewee was hypothetical in terms of those not contributing. The opportunity to actively disseminate recordings and encourage individuals to participate was also curtailed, but the interviewees all felt they had been able to share relevant content. They had all planned the network into their CPD for the year but could be flexible depending on the content.

4.3.2 Networking

One of the key areas that they all felt was valuable was the ability to meet face-to-face rather than simply online. The digital aspect was important to Milton Keynes College Group, but regular events in person were also planned. The face-to-face conference in June was successful, but the timing of other events was challenging. One was during half-term, when

some teachers were away, and another was in July when again some teachers had finished for the academic year. As GCSE results are crucial to maths and English teachers, many take annual leave in early July in order to be available in late August.

Face-to-face events were particularly important to participants as they were keen to build connections and relationships with English and maths colleagues from other colleges. There was a recognition though, that managers were more able to attend in person events than other teachers, so it might be that managers made some of those college-to-college connections, that they could then build on in future. The interviewees suggested holding some meetings that were specifically for network leads or managers to enable the building of connections. One said:

“I would probably look to ring-fence specific meetings for, say, managers only or teachers only and mix in managers and teachers for certain ones you know... it's difficult at times to converse with people who don't understand the larger impact to running stuff.”

They generally felt that the network was responsive to any changes suggested and any feedback. One interviewee said:

[The Network Lead is] *really responsive to needs, really will listen*

The same interviewee also commented that it made the programme inclusive:

Tom's doing a great job in our area of communications and maintaining that, so I don't feel I'm missing out on anything.

As noted above, the Greater Than Network Lead visited 10 individual colleges to promote and plan future events. All interviewees were positive about the possibility of more face-to-face sessions happening in future with some just for managers.

4.3.3 English

One of the final comments about the network from those interviewed was about the name. In the press, there is often a greater focus on the maths element of the condition of funding than English. This increased recently when the Prime Minister discussed his intention for all young people to study maths to the age of 18 (UK Government, 2023). This, and the name, ‘Greater Than Network’ had led some to see the network as solely, or mainly focused on maths. One interviewee said:

My biggest gripe is the name, I think it's maths heavy. Should there be two? Do we have two branches somehow and make it more focused...When you're talking about grade boundaries and nitty gritty [maths and English] are very different.”

Interviewees recognised that the network did cover both English and maths, but there was a desire for there to be additional English content. This was voiced to the Greater Than Network Lead, and changes were made in the autumn. However, the name could not be changed.

5. Challenges

In this chapter, three challenges are identified that those running the network felt had hampered its development.

5.1 Stipend

The first is changes to the stipend. As detailed in chapter 4, the stipend was designed to be paid equally to all member colleges in each year, with limited bureaucracy. It was intended to enable college leads to decide how best to engage in the network. This of course had downsides, in the form of limited control and the potential for free-riding as described in section 3.3.1. However, the upsides, in terms of actively empowering college leads and allowing different colleges to engage in the best way for them, were appreciated.

In summer 2023, the operation of the stipend changed from being one of an equal share to all colleges who were members in the relevant academic year, to becoming more bureaucratic. Colleges were required to submit specific expense claims for travel or cover in order to claim the stipend. This had the effect of reducing the amount of funds claimed, as well as creating a disincentive to send large numbers of staff to in-person events early in the year, in case it was not possible to send anyone later in the year.

Aside from the funds and the practicality however, it also fundamentally disempowered college leads, who now had to plan for ways to spend the money, rather than plan for how best to engage with the CPD being offered. A network requires individuals to want to contribute and participate, and this shift meant a more transactional relationship. If an individual could only claim up to a certain amount, would they still choose to contribute their time or would they only engage up to the value of that amount? Whereas an unfettered stipend might seem difficult from an accounting perspective, divorcing it from the amount individuals participate means that engaging with the network is a personal choice based on whether the professional development will be valuable. Although practically it may have made minimal difference, it shifted the mindset and approach to participation.

5.2 Technology

The network was intended to be run mostly on Microsoft Teams in a similar way to the Microsoft Innovative Educator Expert community, and the Network Lead was supported with the skills required to run the network in this way. However, Milton Keynes College Group suffered a cyber-attack in 2022, which led to stringent cyber security at the organisation. Although crucial for keeping student and staff data safe, this meant that the Microsoft Teams site at Milton Keynes College Group operated with very high levels of security. As the network began to grow, this led to problems whereby individuals from a range of different colleges found this additional security to be a barrier when trying to access the Teams site.

Many of the college leads and managers persevered with the support of the IT team at Milton Keynes College Group but some of the individual teachers did not have the time available to sort out the issues. As a result, the forums did not operate easily, and many individuals did not have access to much of the material. All the sessions were recorded, and calendar invites were sent out to all member college network leads for them to distribute to teaching staff. However, this meant that sessions were less well attended than they might otherwise have been, because individuals struggled to access content, and the recordings were sent out by network leads rather than accessed on the Teams site. Data on interactions were therefore also lost.

This was an unforeseen problem at the beginning of the contract and is one that may have more effective technological solutions in future. Given the safety challenges for college IT systems, making the system less secure was of course not an option. However, it was an additional barrier that hampered the development of the network.

5.3 Time

This contract was due to run until March 2025 and was instead closed in February 2024. The project was to run a network of colleges to support English and maths teachers, and to build that network from scratch. Networks inevitably take some time to develop, and benefit from long periods of time in operation. It may be that this contract was not long enough to enable a network to be successfully built. However, the feedback and interviews suggest that individuals in colleges were excited and engaged, and had begun to plan the network into their CPD. The timing and interim targets show that the programme was on track in terms of engaging participants.

6. Conclusions

This report sets out the operation of the Greater Than Network from April 2023 to February 2024, and seeks to evaluate the network. This programme was unusual for a large English and maths CPD programme in being awarded to a college group, rather than a consultancy or existing CPD organisation or individual. This created issues in terms of timing, as well as ready technology, and the unusual financial stipend approach created difficulties for accounting. However, it was an innovative approach to the challenge of developing CPD that enabled individuals to share their practice, and empowered Heads of Department, as college leads, to select and signpost staff to the most appropriate development while providing opportunities. The network sat in a 'grey space' between fully formal and structured, and fully informal CPD, and aimed to establish something new, from scratch.

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