



Colleges supporting Colleges

THE COLLEGE COLLECTIVE HANDBOOK 2026-27



IN
PARTNERSHIP
WITH



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In its fifth year of operation, The College Collective Pilot remains a unique approach to sector-led consultancy with the aim of retaining and developing consulting talent and expertise within colleges for the benefit of the sector at large and their communities.

Colleges join the Collective to give college managers the opportunity to develop their confidence and capability in leadership, mentoring and coaching as AoC Associate Experts who can support partner colleges and other institutions in the development of learning and skills.

Objectives

- 1 To create a pool of AoC Associate Experts- practising sector managers with recognised and valuable 'pragmatic and practical' skills and expertise.
- 2 To deploy the AoC Associate Experts to support peers in partner colleges as well as other 'client' organisations such as Chambers of Commerce
- 3 To create collaboration between colleges: a self-reliant alliance for improvement to support colleges, our students, and communities.
- 4 To provide cost-effective support via AoC Associate Experts
- 5 To promote colleges and their people as experts in the spaces of skills policy.

This Handbook sets out the guidelines for support and engagement for both Experts, Partner Colleges and colleagues working with the College Collective programme in 2026-2027.

2. THE COLLEGE COLLECTIVE 2026-2027

Our members are a diverse representation- large, small, rural, urban, vocational and academic. Together, we are a unique collaboration that will promote our sector and our people as experts in skills and education.

2.1 What the Programme Entails

The Collective comprises forward thinking colleges who are working in collaboration, sharing managers and insights to share practice and thinking on a wide range of self-identified needs and expertise.

The Collective pools insights and knowledge through recognising and sharing talented practitioners who are trained and accredited as AoC Associate Experts.

- Your college will receive training for selected managers to become AoC Associate Experts.
- AoC Associate Experts undertake on-line modules in order to gain a Certificate of Achievement, and an automatic upgrade to Professional Member of the Institute of Leadership – with digital credential & membership post-nominals to showcase their commitment to delivering great leadership.
- There is a further opportunity to become accredited with The Chartered Institution for Further Education (CIFE) which was established to highlight excellence in further education and skills training. It recognises the unique context of FE through licensure of continued professional development.
- The substantial experience you will gain through The College Collective maps directly to the Associate tier of the CIFE Professional Recognition Framework qualifying you for immediate recognition and the use of postnominals (ACFE) upon successful completion.
- A detailed Needs & Expertise Analysis (Form 1) for each college will gather together headline information on the strengths and areas for development in our Collective.
- An Expertise Analysis (Form 2) for each Expert will create a 'Prospectus of Experts' to share across our Collective and allow partner colleges to request support from available Experts. The support allocated will be confirmed back to you.
- Each Expert will be invited to support a person, people or project in a partner organisation for up to 5 days each, primarily through remote means.
- In return, your college will benefit from excellent support from AoC Associate Experts from partner organisations in the Collective who have been matched to suit your college's needs and requirements.

2.2 Navigating Uncertainty

The College Collective approach exemplifies the leadership skill of dealing with and managing uncertainty. We are clear that there is no one right answer, no one size fits all. We are all here to learn from each other, and collectively we are greater than the sum of our parts. We are committed to open, honest review, evaluation and feedback in order to improve.

3. VISION AND PURPOSE

Our Purpose is:

To harness the diverse and unique perspectives of college professionals to encourage innovation, achieve excellence and create value.

3.1 The Wisdom of Colleges

- The Collective we are creating is designed to pool insights and knowledge through recognising and sharing talented practitioners who will be trained and accredited as AoC Associate Experts.
- We will harness and celebrate the power of diversity in pursuit of our vital interests. We recognise that, together, we are more than the sum of our parts.
- The colleges in our Collective represent the breadth of the college sector- from small to large; urban to rural; serving diverse communities across the UK.
- Our Associate Experts will bring a depth and breadth of practical expertise and will represent the diverse disciplines that make our colleges special.
- Our College Collective will be a community of equals- each college and participant has something of value to offer, and something of value to learn.
- We will be dynamic, inclusive and people-driven. Our colleges will benefit from the power of cognitive diversity to drive innovation, action and business sustainability.
- The College Collective movement will celebrate the diversity and wisdom of colleges accrued over the decades and demonstrate to all concerned that college practitioners are the real experts needed to help build a new economy fit for the 21st century.

3.2 Framing the Purpose

'Humanity's success is sometimes credited to our cleverness, but (ideas) are actually what make us smart. Intelligence is not irrelevant, of course, but what singles out our species is an ability to pool our insights and knowledge and build on each other's solutions' Kevin Laland.

'I believe there's always something that you can learn from someone who is different than you' Maria Muuri

'Humans are smart because we have evolved to connect with other brains'
Matthew Syed

Harnessing college practitioners' unique perspectives and pooling our collective intelligence to:

- tackle the skills challenge
- share for the greater good: knowledge and cultural exchange between colleges
- support colleges in continuous improvement and business sustainability

'To drive innovation and excellence through harnessing and sharing the diverse and unique perspectives of college practitioners'

- For Individuals - harnessing and developing unique perspectives and talent
- For Colleges - excellent practice and innovation through diversity and sharing
- For the Sector - a self-reliant learning community, challenging orthodoxy and driving radical and inspirational change
- For our Nations - connecting ideas across traditional boundaries

4. PRINCIPLES AND ETHICS

4.1 Ethical Framework

The Ethical Framework has been designed and approved by the Project Board, our governing group with senior representation from Partner Colleges.

The Project Board will monitor and oversee adherence to this framework.

We will all be responsible for:

- Fostering collaboration
- Maintaining the focus of the pilot on the agreed scope, outcomes and benefits
- Wholeheartedly championing the College Collective

In the spirit of learning, we will all give timely, honest, constructive feedback to help shape and develop the work and identify and pre-empt any issues before they become problems.

We will accept that there may be 'failures' and lessons learned along the way. If lessons are learned and shared, there will be no failure.

We will share our practice, needs and expertise, and at all times respect other institutions' confidence.

When receiving advice and support from the Collective approach, we will take responsibility for our own decisions and actions.

We will not disrupt or disadvantage another member institution by seeking to actively recruit an AoC Associate Expert.

In all work carried out on behalf of The College Collective, we must take heed of the Nolan principles for those in public office, namely selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

We will recognise our obligations to our home college and partner institutions and must always act in the best interests of both.

We must do nothing to compromise the reputation of our home college, partner institutions and our Collective nor damage the trust and confidence placed in us.

4.2 Mutual Data Sharing Agreement

As a partner college in The College Collective, you agree to share relevant and pertinent data and information to aid the support activities (coaching, mentoring and network meetings).

Examples of information that may be shared amongst colleges are:

- Policies and Procedures
- Report formats
- Examples of lessons, schemes of work
- Work email addresses and contacts

Colleges and Experts will not share:

- Any personal data or information (for example, any report formats must be anonymised and any personal data removed)
- Any information that is commercially sensitive

All participants in The College Collective will also abide by the ethical framework which is included in the Handbook.

5. GUIDANCE FOR SUPPORT

5.1 The AoC Associate Expert Pathway

The Pathway is intended to give all AOC Associate Experts the same baseline of understanding, and the same tools and resources to enable you to provide support to your matched people, person or project.

The pathway is designed using the IoL's Five Dimensions of Leadership- based on extensive research into the knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviours and values of successful leaders.

Authenticity, Vision, Achievement, Ownership, Collaboration

The guidance in this handbook is based in part on the IoL Modules.

5.2 Support Activities in the Programme

Support is intended to start in Autumn 2026 and complete by end July 2027.

There are three main types of support activity in the programme:

- Coaching and mentoring 1-1- an identified Expert matched with a peer
- Group mentoring where a team or group is supported by an Expert to achieve planned outcomes
- Providing a one off CPD session to colleagues across all colleges who would benefit from your area of expertise (Wisdom Sessions)

If you are an identified AoC Associate Expert, we will ask you to submit the agreed plan of activity (Template A) at the start of support, and a brief log of activity (Template B) after each meeting so that progress can be monitored.

6. THE SUPPORT ACTIVITIES

6.1 Mentoring and Coaching Processes in the College Collective

This handbook does not intend to get hung up on definitions and differences between coaching and mentoring. The main focus of this scheme is developmental for all concerned- whether Expert or Peer. The processes of mentoring and coaching can be highly effective tools to aid this development. For the purpose of clarity, we acknowledge definitions may vary and we will always take a pragmatic approach.

Mentoring is a relational activity in a specific context where two people benefit from having conversations. Traditionally, mentoring was considered as the passing on of the experience of an older colleague to a younger less experienced one.

Recent Institute of Leadership & Management research challenges this definition having identified that both parties may obtain significant benefit from the relationship.

For example, 'upward mentoring' or 'reverse mentoring' turns the traditional hierarchical approach to mentoring on its head. Rather than having a more experienced person take a less experienced person "under their wing", reverse mentoring relationships also acknowledge that the more experienced person can benefit from the relationship and learn new insights. **The College Collective approach emphasises the benefit to the support activity for both parties - peers, as well as the added benefit of advancing the skills and understanding of experienced Experts.**

'Coaching focuses on helping another person learn in ways that let him or her keep growing afterward. It is based on asking rather than telling on, provoking thought rather than giving directions and on holding a person accountable for his or her goals' (Frankovelgia, 2010)

Mentoring models have shifted from hierarchical relationships where a mentee benefits from the knowledge and experience of the more experienced senior mentor to more reciprocal models which acknowledge the benefits to both parties of the mentee-mentor relationship.

Therefore, this handbook reviews a few techniques and guidelines from both mentoring and coaching traditions as they are equally useful.

For further insight into coaching and mentoring please complete Institute of Leadership Module Achievement (Coaching and Mentoring).

6.2 A Structured Approach to The College Collective Support

The support activity needs careful planning, delivery and evaluation. A template for agreeing how you will work together will be made available via MS Forms as included in Template A (see appendices).

Preparation

All parties must prepare a list of what they want from the support and then share it with each other. This will establish the motivation for the relationship and begin to establish parameters for what will be discussed in the meetings.

All parties need to explore their readiness for this relationship and have some insight into personal areas for learning and development. It is helpful to highlight strengths but also areas you would like to develop so that each party shares the responsibility for making the relationship work.

Agree how you will work together

All parties need to agree the outcomes of the relationship, define the learning goals, and the process for meetings. Establish ground rules and arrive at a shared understanding about assumptions, expectations, goals, and needs.

Agree issues of confidentiality and boundaries. These discussions should include where to meet, responsibilities and criteria for success, how progress is reviewed, and when mentoring will end.

All agreements need to be summarised, and both parties should sign the agreement. This document can be referred to if problems arise.

Agree how difficulties will be addressed.

Meetings

Agree on how to structure the meetings to optimise opportunities for learning. Mentoring needs open communication, which requires discussion time and reflection, as well as a summary at the end of what has been learnt. It is helpful to find a way to record progress to ensure that the learning goals are being delivered (Please complete Template B to help with this).

Endings

Record what has been achieved and evaluated at the end of each meeting. If the meetings are not delivering what is expected, this needs to be explored, and changes made if needed.

At the end of the mentoring process have a meeting to review the experience and to highlight what has been achieved.

For further insight into reviewing the experience please complete Institute of Leadership Module Achievement (Critical Reflection).

6.3 How to Deliver Good Support as an AoC Associate Expert

- A willingness to communicate what you know. This means sharing with your peers what you have learnt in a way that they can understand and reflect upon
- Availability for regular meetings, which shows your commitment and interest in the person (people) you are supporting
- You are approachable and willing to listen to their perspectives so that your advice is meaningful and helpful
- Honesty and tactfulness. This means saying what needs to be said, because honest feedback enables change and development. Please complete The Institute of Leadership Module Authenticity (Conversations) to help support this.
- Curiosity and supporting individual development using a reflective approach and continuously learning.
- You can be objective and fair in your interactions with peers, but also in any advocacy work you agree on their behalf.
- At all times being compassionate and genuine in your dealings.

6.4 How to Use the Support Well

- Demonstrate your openness to learn from the AoC Associate Expert and peers
- Take the support relationship seriously and showing respect
- Show initiative by being clear about your goals and your learning needs
- Demonstrate flexibility and understanding of others' demanding schedules
- Be prompt and well prepared for all your appointments
- Feedback what you are learning
- Show an interest in others' contribution to your learning
- Acknowledge the contribution others make to your development

7.0 TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

Start the session or meeting by asking people for their own view of the present situation, using active listening and asking open questions to encourage them to talk openly and to raise their awareness and therefore insight into the issue.

7.1 GROW Model

A well-established sequence of questions is offered by the GROW model:



7.2 Techniques to use in Group Sessions - Network Meetings

'We learn most when faced with a real problem which we are obliged to solve.' Lord Weinstock, Managing Director, GEC

Action Learning Sets provide a space for participants to share their own challenges or issues for discussion and receive feedback from others in their group to improve problem solving. The sets are small groups of people who are willing to offer as well as seek help from one another in a supportive and confidential learning environment.

7.2.1 Principles

- Learning starts with not knowing
- There are no experts in those situations where there are no right answers
- Where there are no right answers, you must act in order to learn
- The most important aspects of action learning are the principles that learning should be open, reflective, practical and shared.

In the College Collective often common challenges were identified that affect more than one college. These can be identified as appropriate subjects for an Action Learning Set.

Being part of an action learning set offers you:

- Space for individual reflective learning
- Learning to take back to the workplace and translate into action
- Support and challenge from peers
- A chance to find creative ways to bring about change
- A chance to test beliefs and assumptions and learn what works
- A safe environment to explore new ways of thinking and doing
- Personal, as well as professional, learning and development
- Insight into how others achieve different solutions
- A chance to progress new opportunities and develop new ideas.

7.2.2 The Role of the Facilitators (Experts) in Group Sessions

In network meetings the main role of the 'facilitator' is to 'hold the process' and ensure the focus remains on learning about the real issues. The facilitator should act when appropriate to prevent digression, to ensure that questions are formulated in an 'open' way, and to keep things to time. This may involve pointing out helpful and unhelpful roles of the group's interaction. The facilitator may intervene through a question or statement, such as 'Can you rephrase that question in a more open way?' or 'I observe that you are giving advice rather than letting the presenter find their own answers' or 'You seem not to be paying attention to the root of the matter' or 'Ensure you keep giving each other equal time to interact with the presenter'. The facilitator sets the tone for the meeting and models the actions of being a good set member.

They can interject at any time, but mostly when he or she thinks the group needs support and guidance in the questioning. This will probably be more the case in the first couple of sessions.

7.2.3 Ground Rules of Group Meetings

To enable action learning set members to resolve real issues and develop as individuals, the following Dos and Don'ts have proved most useful.

Do

- Set an equal amount of time for each person
- Listen and encourage the person to talk
- Allow a minute or two after a person has finished to check they have said all they wanted to say
- Attempt to see things from the other person's point of view
- Ask questions which encourage thought and exploration
- Encourage the person to be specific when appropriate
- Support the person by giving good attention
- Respect and value their uniqueness and capacity to take their own decisions

Avoid

- Interrupting until the person has finished
- Imposing your own values, views, opinions, advice
- Being judgmental about the person's values
- Criticising, negating or trivialising what the person is working on
- Assuming that their situation is similar to ones you have experienced

7.2.4 What happens between group meetings?

To get the most out of action learning it is necessary to do some preparation for an action learning set meeting. The most important preparation you can do is to undertake the actions that you agreed to at the previous set meeting. In addition, here are some questions to think about in preparation for each set meeting:

- What have I done since the last set meeting?
- What are the outstanding action points and why?
- Do I still see the issue the same way?
- What have I learnt from what I've done: about myself; about others; about the issue?
- How have my plans changed since the last set meeting and why?
- What are my next steps?
- What do I need from this set meeting?
- How can my colleagues help me?

8. APPENDICES

Links to online forms :

[Template A](#)

[Template B](#)

8.1 [Template A Structure of 1-1 Mentoring and Coaching](#)



COACHING AND MENTORING

This document is to help the participants agree the purpose, structure and objectives of the sessions.

Please use it in your first introductory session, and then use as reference as the meetings continue.

NAMES AND ROLES OF PARTICIPANTS

DESIRED OBJECTIVES OF THE SESSIONS (to be discussed)

For example, these might be to develop techniques to manage under-performing teams; develop plans to increase student attendance; understand barriers to improving employee engagement.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

AGREEMENT OF STRUCTURE AND REGULARITY OF SESSIONS

For example, length of meetings, format (Teams), how often, duration (e.g. January-June)

8.2 Template B Record of Each Session

This is for your use only and does not need to be submitted.



RECORD FOR EACH SESSION

NAMES AND ROLES OF PARTICIPANTS

ITEMS DISCUSSED

-
-
-
-

ACTIONS AGREED

-
-
-
-

FEEDBACK ON WHAT HAS HAPPENED SINCE THE LAST SESSION

-
-
-
-

ANYTHING ELSE YOU FEEL IMPORTANT (CAN BE LEFT BLANK)