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Centres of Vocational Excellence

The Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) programme is an essential part of the Government's ambitious agenda to transform and modernise vocational and technical education and training in England.

The programme is being implemented by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to establish a nationally co-ordinated network of high quality specialist centres of vocational expertise among the learning providers it funds.

The three-year CoVE scheme is well under way. It was first rolled out to further education (FE) colleges that demonstrate excellence in specific vocational and technical subjects, beginning with 16 college pathfinders in 2001.

In 2002 it was extended beyond the FE sector to other work-based training providers, including private and voluntary providers, employer-based providers and group training organisations.

The aim is to develop new, and enhance existing, vocational provision for 16-19 year-olds and for adults. CoVEs are intended to increase participation and achievement in learning and provide a ladder of opportunity into work and higher education.

CoVEs are designed to collaborate with industry and business and demonstrate the support of other partners to meet the current and future skills needs of employers at local, regional and national levels and in specific employment sectors.

They seek to provide learners with access to high quality vocational learning in new and traditional occupations, ranging from computing and care to construction and rail engineering.

CoVEs concentrate on developing the skills of people already in work, new entrants to the labour market and the employment prospects of those seeking work, including people traditionally excluded or disadvantaged in learning or in the labour market.

The primary focus is to boost level 3 skills, which are roughly equivalent to A levels. Only half of our 19-28 year olds hold such qualifications, yet the latest report from the Skills Task Force suggests seven out of 10 jobs will require level 3 qualifications by 2010, including craft and technical subjects.

The challenge is to create an innovative and strategic mix of specialisms that re-invigorate vocational and technical provision and make a major contribution to a modern economy – backed by modern skills – to boost the nation's competitiveness.

College-based CoVEs

The skills-driven programme, consisting of three stages of approval, has made strong progress since its introduction for general FE colleges in 2001:

- in July 2001, 16 pathfinder college CoVEs were selected to provide leadership in the college-based programme. They became operational in September 2001 and are already delivering good results in their specialisms
- in May 2002, in the first round of the main programme, 69 colleges progressed to the programme's next stage
- 120 new proposals from colleges are currently being evaluated in the second round.

The LSC is planning for over 200 college-based CoVEs by 2004 and is well on track to achieve that target.

Work-based CoVEs

In April 2002, the Government extended the programme to non-college-based training providers, including private training providers, voluntary organisations and the training arrangements of clusters of companies.

The LSC is planning for up to 50 CoVEs to be created among training providers beyond the FE college system by 2004. They will complement the FE network.

Opening the scheme to non-college providers was agreed by the Government and the LSC on the basis that they undergo the same rigorous selection process and meet the same criteria as colleges.

In June 2002, five vocational training centres in companies were selected as the first pathfinder work-based CoVEs.

Their role is to test the characteristics and criteria of work-based CoVEs and obtain a good understanding of the development and support that other non-FE providers need to develop their CoVEs.

It is intended that work-based CoVEs will make their facilities and expertise available to a wide range of employers and learners.

The LSC has issued Circular 02/08 on the programme to extend CoVEs to the non-college sector. It is available on the LSC website at www.lsc.gov.uk

Funding

The additional Government funding of over £50 million to expand and extend the scheme has raised the overall budget to more than £150 million.

New CoVEs receive up to £300,000 in the first year they join the programme for development work leading to formal recognition and up to £100,000 in each of the second year and third years to maintain and extend their work.

Pathfinder CoVEs receive additional funding to reflect their important role in supporting prospective new centres.

Partnerships

One of the key priorities is to ensure that new specialist centres work closely with employers and other partners to identify priority skills needs in the local, regional and national economy.

This involves extending and strengthening established relationships with organisations such as Regional Development Agencies and the new Sector Skills Councils.

The LSC's network of 47 local Learning and Skills Councils is taking the lead in identifying prospective CoVEs and helping them reach the programme's qualifying standard.

Oversight of the programme is carried out by the LSC's National Policy and Selection Panel to ensure an effective spread of vocational skills, learning programmes and geographical balance.

Performance criteria for CoVEs includes a commitment to encourage employers to participate in the development of the specialist curriculum.

CoVEs are expected to show high retention and achievement rates among learners, develop first-rate teaching staffs, share their experiences and transfer good practice across the learning and training sector.

CoVE status is normally awarded for three years, after which re-recognition is likely to be required.

The Learning and Skills Development Agency partners the LSC in developing the CoVE programme. The Learning and Skills Council was set up by the Government in April 2001 to take over the roles of the former Further Education Funding Council and Training and Enterprise Councils. It has a national office and 47 local LSCs.

Its creation was the biggest single investment in post-16 education and training the country has seen. It represents the first truly unified approach to the challenge of attracting people into learning, improving the quality of provision and raising the skills of young people and adults.

The LSC's total budget is £7.3 billion in 2002-03.

For further information about the Learning and Skills Council, visit our web site (www.lsc.gov.uk) or call our help line on 0845 019 4170.