report

Centres of Vocational Excellence in practice

A Survey Report on 40 CoVEs in Five Skills Sectors

Ofsted Better education and care

ADULT LEARNING INSPECTORATE

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Executive summary

Policy context

Colleges for Excellence and Innovation (November 2000) announced the development of a network of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) as a key element in modernising the further education sector. The creation of specialist vocational centres within colleges and private training providers was seen as a means of strengthening the sector's response to national, regional and local economic challenges. It was envisaged that 400 CoVES would be established by 2006. As of July 2005, there are 270 fully operational CoVEs and a further 100 with interim status.

More recent government policy has further implications for CoVEs. The *14-19 Education and Skills* white paper (February 2005) acknowledged the continued importance of CoVEs in developing links with schools and in taking a lead in expanding vocational options for 14- to 19-year-olds. It announced a review of the CoVE network, scheduled for 2006. The *Skills: Getting on in business getting on in work* white paper (March 2005) introduced proposals for sector skills academies which, as national centres of excellence, will build on the CoVE network.

Scope of the survey

The survey comprised visits to 40 CoVEs drawn from the five major skills sectors central to the CoVE project. During the period February to May 2005, inspectors visited 10 CoVEs in engineering, eight CoVEs in each of construction, hospitality and catering, and information and communications technology (ICT), and six CoVEs in care.

Key findings

The development of the CoVE network has made an important contribution to raising the profile and status of vocational education and training. Early in the initiative the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) established eight aims for the CoVE network. The most progress has been made in the following aspects of these aims:

- increasing learner numbers on vocational programmes
- the identification of skills needs
- engagement with employers
- the development of specialist facilities
- collaboration within the CoVE network

The least progress has been made in:

- improving recruitment and achievements at level 3
- widening the participation of non-traditional learners
- increasing the flexibility of provision
- marketing of the CoVE brand
- collaboration between CoVEs and neighbouring providers.

CoVEs have achieved a significant expansion in learner numbers. Most CoVEs have met, and in some cases exceeded, challenging targets for recruitment. Increased participation is most marked in CoVEs in care, construction and ICT. However, in 20 per cent of the CoVEs surveyed, although there has been an increase in participation by adults on part-time and short courses, recruitment to full-time

programmes at level 3 has remained static. **Progress has been limited in widening the participation of non-traditional learners**, particularly in CoVEs in engineering, construction and ICT.

Good progress has been made in the identification of skills priorities and improvements in arrangements to consult with employers in the planning of provision, particularly in engineering, construction and care. There is clear evidence of a positive change in employers' attitudes towards training and their willingness to become more closely involved in its delivery, most notably in CoVEs in engineering, care, and hospitality and catering. However, many employers remain reluctant to meet the costs of training. Most CoVEs in care, construction and engineering have developed flexible modes of delivery to meet employers' needs. This is less evident in CoVEs in ICT and in hospitality and catering.

Achievements on short courses and progression by learners within CoVEs are good. There are some high-performing CoVEs. However, with the exception of CoVEs in care, satisfactory levels of achievement on long courses at level 3 have mostly been maintained rather than improved, particularly in CoVEs in hospitality and catering, engineering and ICT. **Retention on some full-time programmes remains poor**, particularly in ICT CoVEs.

Most CoVEs have invested well in developing industry-standard learning environments. Construction and engineering CoVEs in particular have benefited from employers' donations of specialist equipment. Employer sponsorship in hospitality and catering CoVEs has been more limited.

The quality of education and training in most CoVEs is good. The up-to date facilities and equipment are used well to provide a stimulating learning experience which usually reflects current industry practice. Good acquisition of vocational skills is linked effectively with the development of broader employability skills. Standards of teaching and learning are particularly high in care. Thirty-three per cent of teaching in ICT is no better than satisfactory, and insufficient attention is given to individual learning needs. Too much reliance is placed on teacher-led approaches in theory sessions in construction. CoVEs have invested well in information and learning technology (ILT), but in many cases teachers are not yet confident in using it. Virtual learning environments are at an early stage of development and have yet to become a significant learning tool for most CoVEs.

Teachers and managers are well supported in their professional updating and in gaining additional vocational experience. This knowledge has been put to good use in the development of programmes, particularly in ICT. In a third of the hospitality and catering CoVEs surveyed, however, industrial updating is not used effectively to inform and update classroom practice.

Many CoVEs have established good regional networks and share their expertise well through specialist development groups. Most CoVEs have developed good links with local schools and expanded their provision for 14- to16-year-olds. There is insufficient sharing of good practice within consortia, and **collaboration is poor between CoVEs and neighbouring providers working in the same skills sector.**

Marketing initiatives have not secured strong brand recognition in 20 per cent of the CoVEs surveyed. In these instances, employers are not sufficiently aware of the CoVE initiative and their expertise has not been used effectively in the development of programmes.

Many CoVE managers do not routinely collect evidence of the CoVE's tangible benefits to learners or employers. Arrangements for the collection and analysis of employment destination data and learners' progression within employment are inadequate. Where several providers are working under consortia arrangements, there is insufficient collation and analysis of performance data and monitoring of the CoVE's overall impact.

Contextual information about the CoVE network and survey methodology

In November 2000, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment set out his vision for a modern further education sector in *Colleges for Excellence and Innovation*. Central to this vision was a modernisation of the role that colleges play in meeting national, regional and local economic challenges. Centres of Vocational Excellence were identified as a key element in meeting this aim and the intention was to develop a network of 400 CoVEs by 2006. As of July 2005, 270 CoVEs have full operational status. A further 100 have interim status and are awaiting final approval, and 20 are temporarily suspended.

More recent government policy documents have further implications for CoVEs. The *14-19 Education and Skills* white paper acknowledged the continued importance of CoVEs in developing links with schools, and in taking a lead in expanding vocational options for 14- to 19-year-olds. It announced a review of the CoVE network, to take place in 2006. The *Skills: Getting on in business getting on in work* white paper introduces proposals for sector skills academies which, as national centres of excellence, will build on the CoVE network.

This survey comprised visits to 40 CoVEs, drawn from the five major skills sectors central to the CoVE project. During the period February to May 2005, inspectors visited 10 CoVEs in engineering, eight CoVEs in each of construction, hospitality and catering and ICT, and six CoVEs in care. Thirty of the CoVEs in the survey are based in further education colleges, nine in private training providers and one in an institution of higher education. Six CoVEs operate as consortia, with a designated lead partner supported by two or three other providers in the region. One CoVE has a national remit. CoVEs located in all nine LSC regions were visited, and ranged from the earliest pathfinder CoVEs to those selected in the fourth commissioning round.

Survey visits were carried out by two inspectors over two days. Inspectors met with senior managers, CoVE managers, teachers and technicians. The inspectors toured facilities, observed classes, met with learners and reviewed the learners' work. Inspection and self-assessment reports, performance data, strategic and operational documents were examined. Interviews were held with local employers with direct experience of the CoVE's provision. A letter outlining the key findings was sent to the CoVE on completion of each visit.

The eight aims for CoVEs, determined by the LSC at the beginning of the Cove initiative, were used in the survey as the basis for collecting evidence and making judgements. These aims are:

AIM 1: a significant expansion in vocational learning, particularly at level 3, in terms of overall volumes and participation rates, as measured against the aims for expansion at level 3 identified in the development plan.

AIM 2: increased effectiveness in meeting skills priorities, particularly in responding to the needs of employers.

AIM 3: an improvement in learners' achievements in level 3 provision, including progression into employment and advancement within employment.

AIM 4: widening the participation of non-typical learners at level 3, and the participation of adults.

AIM 5: a significant increase in the extent of collaboration among learning providers, and the promotion of the concept of excellence and continuous improvement in economically important vocational specialisms.

AIM 6: an expansion of the use of industry-standard equipment and facilities in the post-16 sector, including leverage of greater employer contributions to improve provision.

AIM 7: examples of innovation and flexibility in order to meet the needs of employers.

AIM 8: a positive change in the attitude of employers and their involvement in training as a result of the quality of post-16 provision and its impact on meeting the skills needs of the workforce.

The survey was overseen by a steering group which comprised representatives from the DfES, national and local LSCs, the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI), the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), and employers. Quality assurance took place through monitoring visits and moderation procedures.

Characteristics of successful CoVEs

The more successful CoVEs exhibit many of the following characteristics:

The CoVE has enjoyed continuity of management from its inception. It is well supported by senior managers in the institution. It operates with an appropriate degree of independence within the parameters of a clearly defined relationship with the rest of the organisation.

There has been effective stewardship from the outset by a steering group, and subsequently, close monitoring of the CoVE's performance by a forum which includes employer representatives.

The CoVE has a well-formulated development strategy with good direction from CoVE managers to secure phased growth. There are clear lines of responsibility within the CoVE. Managers are directly involved in promoting the CoVE and sharing good practice locally and nationally.

CoVE managers and teachers have a good understanding of the challenges facing their skills sector and the role of the CoVE's specialism within it. The CoVE's aims and objectives are well understood by staff.

Staff are empowered and motivated by the recognition implied in the awarding of CoVE status. They have high aspirations and seek improvement even where performance is already significantly above sector national averages.

New business is actively pursued. This work is led by a member of staff with a designated responsibility for involving employers and who acts as a key point of contact. Thorough and easily accessible contact records are maintained and employers receive prompt and informed responses to queries.

The CoVE's curriculum is determined by a systematic needs analysis and is subject to regular review. Employers are actively involved in training, and the provision and sourcing of equipment. Programmes are responsive and tailored to meet employers' needs.

Targeted initiatives to widen participation, developed in partnership with other community agencies, result in increased enrolments by non-traditional learners. They also raise awareness of career opportunities and related training and qualification requirements in the sector.

Accommodation is well-designed and resourced to replicate modern working environments and facilitate learning. Equipment is maintained to a high standard and teachers are supported by appropriately trained specialist technicians.

Learners experience training of a high standard, which reflects current industry practice. Good achievement levels in vocational skills are linked effectively to the development of broader employability skills.

Facilities are very well utilised. Timetabling affords a degree of flexibility through devices such as drop-in sessions, and allows for appropriate access to specialist resources by non-CoVE students.

The development needs of teachers and managers are prioritised in relation to the CoVE development plan and include opportunities for industrial secondment. Individuals are well-supported in continuing professional development, the outcomes of which are shared with the rest of the CoVE team to improve overall performance.

The teaching commitment of staff is primarily to the CoVE, but the expertise of advanced practitioners is used well to spread good practice throughout the institution. The sharing of such information is through activities such as work shadowing, championing, mentoring and seminars.

The CoVE plays a strong ambassadorial role in the region, sharing good practice and raising the profile of education and training more generally among employers within the skills sector. The expertise of CoVE staff is widely recognised and their advice is sought by a range of providers and external organisations.

Well-established quality monitoring procedures make good use of feedback from learners and employers.

The CoVE's constructive involvement in the sector specialist development group and the CoVE provider network group contributes to the inter-institutional exchange of good practice.

Developing relations with the relevant sector skills council ensures that the CoVE is well informed about the latest developments in the industry.

Characteristics of less successful CoVEs

The less successful CoVEs exhibit many of the following characteristics:

There is uncertainty over the objectives of the CoVE and how it can be best promoted to the sector. There is no coherent marketing strategy and insufficient brand recognition among learners, employers and the community.

Internal restrictions are imposed on the CoVE's development by the expectation that it should operate in exactly the same way as the rest of the organisation.

Preparatory needs analysis has not been thorough enough. Employers are not consulted in the design of programmes, which are determined primarily by the resources currently available and by existing staff expertise and interests.

Most employers engaged in the CoVE were already clients of the provider. There is insufficient development of the customer base.

Progress is slow, particularly in the first year of operation. The CoVE is working in isolation and does not share or make best use of the good practice which exists within the institution, or more widely throughout the CoVE network.

There are few examples of flexible provision. Courses are restricted to academic terms with few opportunities to begin courses other than at designated term start dates.

The need to increase participation by under-represented groups has been identified, but the CoVE has no strategies to achieve improvement.

There has been little staff development beyond meeting the immediate needs associated with the use of new equipment.

Teaching practice is unimaginative and has not been influenced by the most recent developments in the industry.

The CoVE does not have a clearly defined, physical identity. Learners are mostly unaware that they are part of a CoVE.

New resources are not used efficiently and teaching areas are under-used.

The CoVE is maintaining existing standards rather than raising them, with no clear strategies to secure improvement.

The CoVE makes poor use of data to monitor performance and measure the effects of its work. Data is not collected specifically for CoVE courses. There is some uncertainty in defining which learners are part of the CoVE.

In consortia arrangements, there are difficulties in obtaining timely and comparable information about learners' performances from partners. Summary data cannot be generated and used to inform management decisions.

The CoVE does not collect progression data, or analyse the effect of CoVE training on learners' contributions to their employer's businesses, as a matter of routine. There is not enough monitoring of learners' progress into and within employment.

Target-setting and monitoring of the implementation of the CoVE's development plan are poor.

Where weaknesses have been identified at inspection, the CoVE has been slow to resolve them.

Recommendations

Priorities for individual CoVEs

Learner recruitment and performance

- review the CoVE curriculum and ensure appropriate recruitment to programmes which lead to the core sector qualifications identified by sector skills councils
- increase the recruitment of learners from under-represented groups and improve the monitoring of their performance
- improve the success rates of learners on full-time courses at level 3
- routinely collate and share evidence of the benefits of CoVE to learners, such as the development of new skills, increased motivation and improved progression rates into and within employment.

Teaching and learning

- ensure that experience gained by teachers through industrial up-dating is used in classroom practice and is reflected in learning activities and assignments
- further develop the use of ILT and virtual learning environments to promote active learning, extension activities and opportunities for independent study
- ensure that the currency and high standards of specialist equipment are maintained, particularly in fast-moving sectors such as ICT
- give greater priority to sharing and promoting good practice within the CoVE's host institution and with neighbouring providers working in the same skills sector.

Marketing and employer participation

- maintain the marketing momentum in raising public awareness of training and career opportunities within the CoVE's skills sector
- continue to promote full-cost bespoke provision for employers, including more options for flexible modes of delivery
- develop the client base with greater emphasis on employers who have not previously accessed such training
- develop training in response to regulatory and legislative changes in the CoVE's skills sector
- routinely collate and share evidence of the benefits of the CoVE to employers, such as the contribution to recruitment, capacity building, gains in operational efficiency and improved productivity.

Priorities for the CoVE network and the LSC

- provide support for individual CoVEs in planning for their sustainability
- review consortia arrangements where geographical distance precludes regular contact between partners, and where the rationale for collaborative working and designated specialisms is unclear
- maintain support for specialist development groups as a means of sharing good practice and as a forum to provide informed comment on future government proposals

- align the CoVE network to the regional priorities recently established by regional development agencies and the LSC
- further develop the marketing of the CoVE network to improve brand recognition among employers, in particular to raise awareness among smaller organisations and those not regularly involved in training.

Priorities for other stakeholders

- sector skills councils should ensure that the CoVE network's specialist expertise and operational experience is fully utilised in the development of sector skills academies
- regional skills partnerships should ensure that the CoVE network's local employment market intelligence is used in the development and realisation of regional skills strategies
- awarding bodies should improve their response time and simplify their procedures in accrediting new programmes and approving variations in existing programmes. This should include extending options for unit-based achievement
- the DfES should promote consistency in the work of government departments to ensure that initiatives which offer free or subsidised training do not compromise the development by CoVEs of full-cost provision targeted at the same client groups
- all agencies should do more to manage the expectations of employers, in relation to the government's requirement for increased employer investment to meet the costs of training for learners over 19 years of age.

Evaluative commentary and examples of good practice

AIM 1: Learner recruitment

Most CoVEs providing care programmes have increased learner numbers substantially, in line with the targets set in their development plans. Growth has been particularly marked in work-based learning programmes at level 2, full-time and part-time courses at level 3, a wide range of short courses for adults, and programmes for 14- to 16-year-olds. Some CoVEs have developed additional provision at entry level, at foundation degree level and level 4 registered managers' courses. Participation rates are generally lower for national vocational qualification (NVQ) courses at level 3, where there is a more thorough initial assessment and careful matching of job roles to the target qualifications. Increasing numbers of care workers in social and nursing care homes and domiciliary care are completing short, dementia care courses. However, many employers in the care sector are slow to take up level 3 training to meet government registration and inspection requirements.

In ICT provision, CoVEs have achieved growth in learner numbers at all levels and have met their recruitment targets. Vocational pathways have been improved by the development of high-level technical courses, sometimes as enhancements to existing programmes. Many examples exist of the successful introduction of specialist vendor qualifications and the growth in full-cost bespoke courses such as project management, wireless networking, cabling, network security and training in specialist software. The range of higher-level study has widened and now includes foundation degrees. A third of ICT CoVEs surveyed do not have enough opportunities for work-based learning, or development of employability skills alongside vocational training.

Recruitment levels have increased in hospitality and catering CoVEs. In a third of the hospitality and catering CoVEs surveyed, the most significant growth has occurred at level 2 and on part-time and professional courses. Good progression routes have been established. Thames Valley University offers a comprehensive range of 31 NVQs and vocational qualifications from level 1 to level 5. There are seamless progression opportunities to level 4 and level 5 courses within the university.

Construction CoVEs have achieved a significant growth in learner numbers and the range of programmes available. Construction CoVEs have responded well to the need to meet the exacting demands of regulatory bodies. There is more focus on bespoke, full-cost recovery courses for employers. Provision has been broadened to include computer-aided design and manufacturing training, and specialist building crafts provision, including plastering, wall and floor tiling, floor laying, dry lining and ceiling fixing and on-site assessment and training. A key barrier to increasing recruitment at level 3 is the high currency value of level 2 qualifications, coupled with there being few perceived benefits from the extra year of study required to reach level 3.

In contrast to the other skills areas, a wider variety of specialisms has been developed by engineering CoVEs, reflecting local labour market conditions and a move away from the traditional, more broadly defined engineering occupations. CoVE specialisms range from computer-integrated manufacturing data and fibre optics and mechatronics, to engineering and maintenance skills for manufacturing process industries, and the training and licensing of truck technicians. Overall, learner numbers have increased and there has been substantial growth in specialised, bespoke courses. Work with adults has also expanded in such areas as the provision of training for certification to work in power stations, assuring competence in engineering construction, and the on-site assessment of NVQs. A third of engineering CoVEs have experienced a decline in the number of young people joining traditional full- and part-time courses at level 3, and advanced apprenticeships.

Example 1: the broadening of provision

Barnfield College: CoVE in computer-integrated networking systems.

The CoVE has developed an exceptionally wide range of specialist technical courses. It now has 49 different ICT courses available at level 3, compared with 15 before the CoVE was established. The number of adult learners has doubled over recent years. In the first six months of this academic year, 450 adults and 100 16- to 18-year-olds attended CoVE programmes.

Example 2: well-managed, phased growth

Bridgwater College: CoVE in early years

The CoVE has achieved a significant expansion in vocational learning, particularly at level 3, where learner numbers have risen from 220 pre-CoVE to 350 at the time of the visit. The CoVE has extended level 3 programmes to include NVQs, and teaching assistant and school support staff qualifications. The recent introduction of a foundation degree and the development of a post-graduate leadership award has contributed to increased enrolments at level 4 and 5. There has also been growth in commercial and short courses to meet employer demand. The phased expansion of the CoVE's programme has been very well managed. The section head provides strong leadership, all staff have clear lines of responsibility and appropriate targets are set in the CoVE development plan.

AIM 2: Skills needs identification and employer involvement

In CoVEs offering care programmes, significant progress has been made in involving employers through forums, and focus groups are used to good effect. Recent changes in legislation require care establishments to have at least 50 per cent of their staff qualified to level 2. CoVEs actively support employers to train their staff and offer them flexible modes of delivery and attendance. However, many employers in the care sector are slow to take up the level 3 qualifications required to meet government registration and inspection requirements. Employers are reluctant to pay for training. Meeting the costs of training presents particular challenges for voluntary sector employers reliant on grant aid.

Care CoVEs have developed effective links with Skills for Care and Development, the sector skills council for social care, children and young people. Links with Skills for Health, the health sector skills council, are less well established. There are good local links with some NHS trusts. Early years CoVEs work closely with local Early Years Childcare Development Partnerships (EYCDPs) and SureStart to identify skills gaps. Additional work with local education authorities and schools in the development of teaching assistant and support staff qualifications has been productive, and new NVQs are being introduced. Self-employed childcare workers such as childminders are encouraged to take up qualifications and specialist support groups have been established in the community. Further programmes have been introduced in first aid, working with babies in the private sector, and qualifications at level 2 and 3 for caretakers and support staff.

ICT CoVEs respond well to the needs of employers and enjoy a high level of repeat business for short courses. Most of these CoVEs have made good use of links with e-skills, the sector skills council, awarding bodies, global companies offering vendor qualifications, and other agencies involved in ICT, to promote and develop their work. Most CoVEs make good use of market research and personal contact with local employers, particularly small companies, to identify specific training needs before designing their programmes. Mailshots and publicity materials have raised employers' awareness of CoVE activities. Two ICT CoVEs have realigned their portfolios during their first year of operation. Managers have taken appropriate actions to match their provision to local needs as closely as possible, and to prioritise work which increases the number of linked employers. Two thirds of ICT CoVEs have effective employers' forums such as the one at the Norfolk ICT CoVE. This forum has evaluated a

website development for the brokerage of students on CoVE programmes, has become involved in the delivery of a schools' link initiative, and assists in the preparation of assignments. In a third of the ICT CoVEs surveyed, the CoVE is not promoted successfully to employers, who make very little contribution to the facility, or to the design or delivery of courses. In two CoVEs, the benefits of increased employer involvement in support of short courses do not extend to full-time programmes, where learners do not have sufficient opportunities for work experience.

Employers participate well with most hospitality CoVEs. The employers are involved in course design and consulted in exercises to identify accurately the skills needed in key work roles. They provide work experience opportunities for staff and learners, and visit colleges to give demonstrations and share their experiences of working in the industry. Two CoVEs have developed good links with Springboard, which is a charitable trust, to help promote the hospitality and catering industry. Employers involved in training with two other CoVES are not sufficiently involved at strategic level. Employers are not represented on the CoVE steering group and are not sufficiently involved in course design.

In construction CoVEs, a good range of initiatives to involve employers includes productive links with the sector skills council, employer focus groups, and provider representation on a range of committees and working parties. Some CoVEs have developed links with local building projects. For example, the College of North West London CoVE's 'Building One Stop Shop', an initiative to support local people and employers, has links with major construction projects such as Wembley Stadium and Heathrow Terminal 5. In two CoVEs, employer involvement in programme design is not fully established. In these instances, the CoVE brand is unclear to many employers.

Engineering CoVEs make particularly good use of employer focus groups to determine skills priorities and develop programmes. In some cases there are very effective links with the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board at a strategic and operational level. South West Durham Training Ltd set up the Durham Engineering and Manufacturing Forum to involve employers and match national training initiatives to local needs. Most CoVEs work primarily with staff at medium- to large-sized employers, and do not establish contacts with small engineering firms sufficiently.

Example 1: meeting the needs of specialist telecommunications employers

Barnfield College: CoVE in computer-integrated networking systems.

The CoVE has a marketing manager who provides a single point of contact. This is much valued by employers, who receive quick and informed answers to their queries. The CoVE is very active in the e-skills Telecomms Systems Applications Group, which is a consultative body representing large telecommunications employers and training organisations. Eight local employers helped to shape the CoVE curriculum. Modules have been developed to accredit new areas of telephony with Orange, T-mobile and GSM. The sector skills council has endorsed the unique foundation specialist telecommunications degree. Employers needed a higher level of accredited competences, so tutors assisted Oxford, Cambridge and RSA examinations (OCR) to write new frameworks, such as OCR IPRO level 4. These CoVE tutors are now examiners and external verifiers for these courses. An approach from another employer has led to work with City and Guilds on frameworks for cabling. T-Mobile has requested a telephony-oriented apprenticeship scheme for their engineers.

Example 2: developing the curriculum in response to need

Blackburn College: CoVE in working with children.

The development of the CoVE's curriculum to resolve skills gaps in the early years sector has been very effective. The local early years service's recruitment and training officer carries out an annual skills analysis which is shared with the college. New awards have been introduced,

such as certificates in support work in schools, the teaching assistant certificate in promoting social and emotional development, a level 4 foundation degree in early years care, and assessors' awards to support work-based learning. Short courses, such as first aid and food hygiene certificates have been offered alongside bespoke training. A bespoke, pre-registration childminding course has been developed in response to the needs of the local authority. The CoVE has maintained a close relationship with the new sector skills council, as well as other early years and older children's organisations.

Example 3: monitoring employer involvement

Boston College: CoVE in early years

Records kept by the CoVE's community worker concerning employer involvement use 26 criteria or likely activities as indicators. A matrix has been created which logs each employer's activities. Entries are colour coded to distinguish each year, and any changes, such as employers withdrawing or adding to their activity profiles, can be viewed at a glance. The community worker contacts the employer to find out what triggered the change or to remind them of an event or training activity. The worker keeps a case record about each employer, noting discussions and actions, as well as follow-up activities. Records are kept of employers' views of specific activities and whether the marketing has been successful. The community worker uses this information to monitor the effectiveness of marketing initiatives, to introduce new activities that reflect employers' training needs, and to consolidate successful initial involvement.

Example 4: responding at a national level

British Gas Engineering Academy: CoVE in gas installation and maintenance

The CoVE works with regional development agencies throughout England. Managers are familiar with regional skills priorities and have developed a skills strategy which resolves skill shortages by recruiting more new entrants, upgrading NVQs at level 2 to level 3, and updating the skills of their own workforces. The CoVE provides a growing service to employers in the gas services industry which includes training for the accredited certificate scheme for plumbing operatives and heating engineers, and the full range of assessment. Additional employers, often with no previous involvement in learning, are now working with the CoVE by providing work placements through the Ambition Energy programme, a training scheme for the unemployed. Employers would like to use the CoVE to meet more of their training needs, particularly for advanced apprenticeships. However, they find the training difficult to access because of the high volume of in-company training activity.

Example 5: employer engagement and Eskills4Industry

Lewisham College: CoVE in computing.

A variety of methods is used by this CoVE to involve employers, from postcards through the door to high-quality marketing materials. For several years the college has organised business breakfasts which have featured high-profile speakers, including the prime minister. An online employers' forum has just been launched. There is a clear strategy to meet local priorities and involve micro-businesses. Lewisham is very active in regional initiatives such as the Thames Gateway project. Work with the sector skills council and multinational information technology (IT) corporations has brought industry-recognised vendor qualifications into the national framework so that they are now publicly funded. Working collaboratively with employers, the CoVE has identified commercially valuable niche skills and learning requirements. A marketing manager provides a single point of contact for employers and leads in promoting the CoVE, particularly to large prestigious businesses in the City. Collaborative work with Deloitte Touche

Tohmatsu, Jobcentre Plus, and the LSC has resulted in a scheme entitled Eskills4Industry. The scheme enables New Deal 18-24 clients to study for a specialised apprenticeship and is open to those from particularly deprived neighbourhoods who have not yet achieved at level 3. Learners spend six months in college acquiring background knowledge leading to software qualifications, and attending a college-devised programme to develop workplace skills and key skills. This is followed by a 6-month placement with a company in the City which is arranged by Deloitte. The Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Company and News International are among the companies which have taken part. The project has been extended to nine other colleges in deprived areas of the country, and the CoVE is leading the sharing of learning strategies and programme models.

AIM 3: Achievement

Overall, achievements on short courses and internal progression within CoVEs are good. With the exception of CoVEs in care, satisfactory levels of achievement on long courses at level 3 have been maintained, rather than improved, particularly in CoVEs in hospitality and catering, engineering and ICT. The retention of learners on some full-time programmes remains poor, particularly in ICT. Where several providers are working under consortia arrangements, there is insufficient collation and analysis of performance data, and ineffective monitoring of the CoVE's overall impact. Arrangements for the collection and analysis of employment destination data and learners' progression within employment are inadequate in many CoVEs.

In care CoVEs, achievements on most courses are very good. There are clear improvements in learners' achievements on level 3 programmes, with good progression into employment and advancement within employment. Most CoVEs have created good progression routes from level 1 to level 4 or 5. In a third of care CoVEs visited, retention on full-time programmes at level 3 is poor.

Achievements on short courses provided by ICT CoVEs are very good. Internal progression to higher-level courses is generally good. Progression rates for full-time learners to higher education or employment are very good. Achievements on full-time courses are mostly satisfactory, but in many cases there is little evidence of improvement since gaining CoVE status. Retention on long-term courses at level 3 remains poor in half of the ICT CoVEs visited. Where several providers are involved in consortia, CoVEs have experienced difficulty in collating and analysing summary data. A third of CoVEs do not collect data about employment destinations, or learners' progression within employment as a matter of routine. CoVEs do not carry out sufficient analyses of the effects of CoVE training on learners' contributions to their employer's businesses.

In many hospitality CoVEs, the development of complex skills and advanced crafts is good. Learners on supervisory courses have good organisational skills and manage other learners effectively. Learners' food preparation and cooking skills are good or very good in most instances. Progression between level 2 and 3 is very good. Most learners on level 3 programmes demonstrate a good understanding of industrial practice in hotels. However, in 50 per cent of the hospitality CoVEs visited, achievement rates at level 3 have been maintained at a satisfactory level, rather than improved. Retention of learners is poor on long courses at level 3 in 33 per cent of the hospitality CoVEs surveyed. Arrangements are inadequate for the collection and analysis of employment destination data, and information on learners' progression within employment. Providers in consortia are not sharing performance data to use in management decisions, and in two CoVEs steering groups do not give sufficient attention to learners' performances.

Achievement levels vary in construction CoVEs. Retention and achievement rates are excellent at the British Gas Engineering Academy CoVE and very good at the North Trafford College CoVE. Overall, there is good retention of learners at level 2 and good achievement rates on short courses. Learners'

progression is good from level 1 to level 2 and from level 2 to level 3, but few learners progress beyond level 3. Fifty per cent of the CoVEs surveyed have not made sufficient improvements in retention and achievement rates at level 3, and in 33 per cent of CoVEs, the rate of apprenticeship framework completion is poor.

Learners develop their practical skills well in engineering CoVEs. Many learners have extended their technical understanding of work processes, and the new skills they have gained have enabled them to broaden their job roles. In most CoVEs, the retention and achievement rates on short courses are good. However, in half of the CoVEs visited, trends in achievement and the completion of apprenticeship frameworks have shown little improvement since the organisations gained CoVE status.

Example 1: effective support for work-based learners on an apprenticeship programme

Blackburn College: CoVE in working with children.

At 91 per cent, the success rate on the work-based learning apprenticeship programme is outstanding. Apprenticeships are integrated with the rest of the CoVE curriculum and tutors and assessors work closely together. Thorough initial assessment ensures that learners are placed on the most appropriate programme. A monthly meeting takes place between tutors and assessors to review each learner's progress. Close liaison between CoVE staff and employers ensures that issues are followed up quickly. Each learner has a mentor in the workplace who is responsible for guiding them and helping them to prepare for assessment. A guide book for mentors, prepared by CoVE staff, enables them to fully understand each step of the learner's programme and helps them to link background knowledge with practical work. The guide is written in accessible language and the NVQ and key skills assessment requirements are explained well.

Example 2: well-organised use of work-based assessors to improve learners' progress

Norton Radstock College: CoVE in care

This CoVE uses mainly work-based assessors to assess learners. Assessment can be readily incorporated with the learners' daily work tasks and is carried out by staff with whom the learner is familiar, and who would ordinarily be involved with the learner's welfare. As a result of commiting substantial time to the training of work-based assessors, achievement rates are improving and learners are progressing more quickly. Standardisation meetings are held regularly to support assessors.

AIM 4: Widening participation

CoVEs in care have made good progress in increasing participation by non-traditional learners. New routes have been introduced to recruit adults, through part-time, evening, community-based, and short courses, and through partnerships with the EYCDP. Employees at all levels in the care sector, from domestic assistants to care managers, are encouraged to participate in training. The introduction of work-based learning programmes provides an alternative route to training for younger learners. New learners have also been recruited to teaching assistants' courses, including a range of learners with no previous experience of formal education and training. In some cases New Deal for Lone Parents is available, as well as opportunities for unemployed groups through the local intermediate labour market. Links involving SureStart establish good contacts with disadvantaged communities. Good progress has been made in involving a wider group of learners through key stage 4 childcare courses in local secondary schools and college-based learners on entry to employment (E2E) programmes. Participation rates for learners from minority ethnic groups and for men are often still low. Male learners are not used sufficiently to actively promote care training.

CoVEs in ICT take part very effectively in outreach activities, working, for example, with voluntary organisations in deprived areas, with schools, and with learners in secure institutions. Specialist qualifications have been developed to meet the needs of employed adults and courses are available part-time, during the evening and on employers' premises. However, women are significantly under-represented on many CoVE courses, and there is little evidence of the targeting of minority ethnic groups.

Hospitality CoVEs have increased participation by 14- to 16-year-olds through the Increased Flexibility Programme (IFP) and Saturday schools. In the CoVE at Thames Valley University, a research manager has responsibility to develop support initiatives, including work with Springboard, Connexions, careers organisations and local schools. Middlesbrough College's CoVE has worked well with unemployed adults recruited to a level 2 NVQ food preparation and cooking course. The CoVE has good links with the seven schools in Middlesbrough, and pupils complete 20 per cent of their general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) course in hospitality and catering at the college. Although 50 per cent of the hospitality CoVEs visited have established links with local restaurants which offer ethnic cuisine, there are not enough initiatives to attract minority ethnic learners or their employers.

In construction CoVEs, the number of school pupils participating in vocational learning programmes through the IFP has grown and the number of employed learners enrolled on short courses has increased. However, overall, CoVEs have made only limited progress in recruiting women and learners from minority ethnic groups. Half of the CoVEs do not take enough specific action to target under-represented groups.

Engineering CoVEs have increased participation by employed adults by developing a range of customised short courses and NVQ training and assessment in the workplace. Collaboration has been particularly good between engineering CoVEs and local schools and colleges, enabling 14- to 16-year-old learners to gain engineering experience. The young apprenticeship scheme is having a positive impact and this year employers will begin to recruit former students who have completed this programme. The CoVE operated by the private training provider, Midland Group Training Services, participates in this scheme as well as a Saturday morning 'techno club' that is very popular with a wide range of young people. At Telford College, specialist equipment, such as the computer-integrated manufacturing facility, is of benefit to not just the CoVE engineering learners, but also to those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who need to work in a well-controlled and safe environment. Many engineering CoVEs do not focus their promotions sufficiently on the recruitment of women learners and people from minority ethnic groups. Targets have been set to increase participation by under-represented groups, but CoVEs have no strategies to achieve them.

Example 1: encouraging the participation of minority ethnic learners

Blackburn College: CoVE in working with children

The CoVE works well with community groups to engage non-traditional learners. Participation rates for learners with an Asian background are well above the percentage representation in local populations. A wide range of delivery modes is offered, including evening classes, Saturday provision, full-time and part-time courses. The 'women only' teaching space in the centre of town has been particularly beneficial and good support is provided by an Asian heritage worker who also acts as an interpreter. Progression rates are high from level 1 programmes through to level 2 and 3. A good initiative has been developed to encourage more boys into childcare through the promotion of a school road show.

Example 2: setting targets for widening participation and monitoring the performance of specific learner groups

British Gas Engineering Academy: CoVE in gas installation and maintenance

The CoVE has increased its recruitment of learners from minority ethnic groups to the advanced apprenticeship programme from 7 per cent in 2003, to 12 per cent in 2004. The CoVE has an effective equality and diversity strategy and an equality and diversity management team. Targets have been set to significantly increase the number of women learners and those from minority ethnic groups by 2010. Unemployed adults have the opportunity to gain industry-recognised qualifications and employment through the Ambition Energy programme. Retention and achievement rates on Ambition Energy programmes are good. Of those beginning in 2004, 93 per cent are still in training. Of those completing their apprenticeships to date, 86 per cent have achieved their NVQ at level 2, their Council for Registered Gas Installers (CORGI) registration and gained employment in the industry.

Example 3: initiatives to involve women

City College Norwich, the College of West Anglia, and Great Yarmouth College: Norfolk Computing and Networking CoVE.

This CoVE has developed good initiatives to increase the recruitment of women. These initiatives include a 'women into networking' programme (WIN), and the development of after-school computing clubs for girls. Achievement and progression rates into employment from the WIN course are good. The CoVE also has some good arrangements with schools throughout Norfolk, including the development of local leading software academies and introductory IT courses.

Example 4: taking learning to the learner

Sussex Hospitality CoVE

On behalf of the Sussex Hospitality CoVE consortium, The Hotel and Catering Training Company commissioned the conversion of a 7.5 ton lorry. It has been fitted out to a high standard and can seat 12 learners with ample room for presentations. The bus provides easy access to learning and is particularly useful for learners in remote locations or those not well served by public transport. Contact with employers has increased, especially with small businesses, and this has led to an increased take-up of short, theory courses.

Example 5: a private training provider developing good links with schools

NETA Training: CoVE in engineering construction

The CoVE has developed a GCSE programme popular with local schools. About 180 pupils are taking GCSEs in engineering, using CoVE facilities. The workshop is well-equipped and provides a good learning environment which reflects current working practices. Pupils are expected to work to recognised engineering standards and they adapt well to the realistic environment. School teachers are actively involved in developing their own understanding of the industry and the engineering qualification.

Example 6: provision in the workplace

South Yorkshire Hospitality and Catering CoVE

Doncaster College has developed a good range of workplace provision, which includes working with the school meals service to improve the quality of food, ensuring that costs are controlled and that kitchens and service areas are managed effectively. The remainder of the

work is with contract caterers, hospitals and hotels. Learners are mostly women, many of whom have not been in education since leaving school.

Example 7: young apprentices

Telford College of Arts and Technology (TCAT): CoVE in engineering and maintenance skills for the manufacturing process industries.

In a successful partnership with two local schools, TCAT recruits around 20 young apprentices (year 10 pupils). They attend college for two days each week and spend a further day on work experience. Their work at college is certificated through a level 1 progression award in year 1 and a level 2 progression award in year 2. The pupils take a further three GCSEs in school. This initiative is having a very positive affect on the learning and behaviour of these pupils. There is a strong corporate identity, and pupils receive overalls and safety boots, polo shirts and a sweatshirt, all of which bear the college logo.

AIM 5: The quality of teaching and learning, collaboration and promoting excellence

High standards of teaching and learning were observed in CoVEs in care. Opportunities for professional development are good and new ideas are incorporated effectively into CoVE teaching. A third of care CoVEs surveyed do not use ILT sufficiently. Teachers are not confident enough in its use. The knowledge and expertise of CoVE staff are shared well within the institutions, through activities such as work shadowing, seminars and workshops. Good practice is promoted widely through the work of the sector specialist development group and CoVE provider networks. These are effective in maintaining regular contact between CoVEs and in sharing different methodologies. This works particularly well where CoVE managers have a flexible teaching commitment that enables them to actively participate in promoting the CoVE and sharing good practice locally and nationally.

Overall, a third of the learning sessions in ICT CoVEs were no better than satisfactory. There is too much emphasis on using printed worksheets during practical workshops, particularly on full-time courses, and insufficient account is taken of learners' individual needs. In some cases groups are small and attendance is low. However, more innovative teaching, which promoted active learning, was observed in two ICT CoVEs working in partnership with the standards unit of the DfES. The expertise gained by ICT teachers and managers in the development of CoVEs is used well within the institutions to develop CoVEs in other skills sectors. ICT CoVEs act as catalysts to encourage other college teachers to develop their ILT skills. In consortia, good collaborative arrangements are being established between partnership colleges which would otherwise be in competition. A third of ICT CoVEs surveyed do not have well-established collaborative arrangements with colleges outside the CoVE network.

In most hospitality CoVEs, teaching and learning are good. Teachers use a wide range of learning activities. The various menus and the range of dishes provide students with a good variety of tasks to develop their occupational skills. In a third of hospitality CoVEs surveyed, the more recent industry experience gained by many staff is not always being used to inform and update classroom practices. The use of ILT is increasing, particularly through the development of chef demonstration theatres with video recording facilities. At the Middlesbrough College CoVE two ILT champions have been appointed and course notes are accessible to learners through the college intranet. Good practice is shared well between hospitality CoVEs. For example, Thanet College CoVE has good links with the London original pathfinders group, and with CoVEs in Portsmouth and Hull. The college is working collaboratively on key skills materials with the London and Southeast network. Generally, good practice is not shared sufficiently within consortia and there is insufficient collaboration with other local providers working in the same skills sector.

Teaching is generally good in construction CoVEs. Teachers display high levels of technical expertise and make good use of site experience in learning sessions. There is an over-reliance on teacher-led approaches in theory lessons. In some consortia arrangements, although the managers of the CoVE meet regularly, good practice is not shared sufficiently and systematically between teachers and assessors. Some CoVEs have experienced difficulties in recruiting appropriately experienced teachers and in providing temporary cover to release teachers on secondments.

Teaching and learning is good in engineering CoVEs. Teachers' expertise is valued and their advice is sought by a range of external organisations. Good, collaborative links have been established with other engineering CoVEs, regionally and nationally. Collaboration with schools has been particularly effective in developing vocational learning opportunities for 14- to16-year-olds. Collaboration with other engineering providers is not fully established.

Example 1: work of the sector development group

Barnfield College: CoVE in computer-integrated networking systems.

The sector development group is a productive arena in which to share good practice. Barnfield, Lewisham, Sunderland and Abingdon and Witney Colleges organised and ran an event to share good practice at the headquarters of a large global communications company. The event was well attended and stimulated further discussions and exchanges of ideas and information between the delegate colleges.

Example 2: collaborating with external partners

Bridgwater College: CoVE in early years.

The CoVE's productive collaborative arrangement with the EYCDP and SureStart has made a valuable contribution to very good standards of teaching, learning, and success rates. Good work has been carried out in partnership with the DfES standards unit on the development of good practice materials for teaching observation skills to early years staff, and in participating in dissemination events. This has promoted excellent practice in early years care to external audiences. The CoVE has a number of advanced practitioners who share good practice through a cross-college group.

Example 3: sharing good practice internally between departments

Lewisham College: CoVE in IT

The CoVE has shared its expertise very effectively with other departments within the college. It helps to specify, install and maintain all the ICT systems that are used by the catering CoVE. These systems can record and broadcast cookery demonstrations through the virtual learning environment and the worldwide web. This has led to approaches from high-profile employers such as large hotel chains. Construction was the only curriculum area found to be unsatisfactory in the college inspection. The ICT CoVE has shared teaching and learning strategies and helped staff to improve their own ICT skills and develop an ICT curriculum for construction workers. Construction is now a key department in the college's strategy for expansion and is preparing for participation in major local initiatives such as the Thames Gateway.

AIM 6: Accommodation and resources for learning and professional development

The development of new and refurbished buildings and the investment in resources have made a significant contribution to raising the profile and improving the status of CoVEs in care. Buildings are well-designed and most are used flexibly to meet a range of different needs. A wide range of new equipment has been purchased for training in areas such as moving and handling, first aid, and health and safety. Learning aids, textbooks, reference materials and virtual, computerised dolls have also been purchased. Laptop and desktop computers have been acquired to enable learners to access training in the community, in care homes, and at the CoVE. Good use is made of employers' skills and knowledge to help with training. Employers encourage the use of their own equipment to promote the practical elements of care and are willing to share their experience of working in the sector by giving talks to groups of learners. Many teachers have recent industrial experience and they have good opportunities to update their professional skills by attending training courses or spending time in nurseries or other centres for children.

In one CoVE there is limited use of the centre as a drop-in facility by CoVE learners and it is not used sufficiently for teaching or independent study by other staff and learners in the department in which it is based.

In ICT, CoVE capital funds have been invested well to provide high-quality learning environments with a good range of industry-standard equipment. In most cases facilities are used well and often include designated areas for practical work and quiet enclosed areas for group and briefing activities. Teachers and managers can choose from an extensive range of staff development opportunities including work shadowing, updating skills and the piloting of new courses. Employers' forums are used to identify opportunities for teachers to take part in periods of industrial shadowing. Staff are encouraged to attend professional updating events in the UK and abroad. Some specialist part-time teachers have been recruited from industry. In one CoVE, courses take place in a large, open-plan workshop. Although this is cost-effective and is useful for team teaching, some learners struggle to concentrate on complex tasks when there are distractions from other groups. In another CoVE, the facilities are not used sufficiently during the day.

Investment in hospitality CoVEs has greatly improved the facilities available. Major capital projects have included public restaurant refurbishment, the creation of chefs' theatres, specialised kitchens, and the development of other resources such as interactive ILT in classrooms, CoVE websites and CD-ROMS for recruitment and marketing. In a third of the hospitality CoVEs surveyed there is little evidence of financial sponsorship by local employers.

In construction CoVEs there has been a significant expansion in the use of industry-standard equipment and facilities, with increasing contributions from employers. Workshops provide the most modern machinery, combined with high-quality tools and consumables. At the Bedford CoVE, major central heating boiler and control manufacturers supply their own equipment for use in training. Learners are able to work on the very latest heating equipment being installed in residential and commercial properties. There are good opportunities for staff to gain additional training and industrial secondments. Thirty-three per cent of the construction CoVEs visited had cramped workshops. Poor housekeeping and limited storage space result in clutter and safety hazards.

In engineering CoVEs, high-quality learning environments present a modern image of engineering and manufacturing. Workshops are spacious, clean and well-organised. Modern equipment has been purchased, such as state-of-the-art computer-controlled machining and polymer manufacturing facilities. Employers often make significant contributions of equipment. Teaching areas in most CoVEs have multi-media projectors and interactive whiteboards. In some cases, specialist staff with very recent industrial experience have been recruited to improve skills levels and knowledge within the

CoVE. One CoVE's specialist engineering equipment is not used sufficiently, and in another CoVE the practical resources and accommodation are dated. A third provider has instigated little staff development beyond the immediate needs associated with the use of new equipment.

Example 1: The Forest School

Bridgwater College: CoVE in early years

As a result of visits to explore training practice in Denmark, the CoVE has established a forest school. A forest classroom has been established in the early years excellence centre on the CoVE site. A tutor has been appointed to develop the skills and experience of mainstream teachers of young children, young people and people with learning or behaviour difficulties, in working with the natural environment. Qualifications are offered at level 1, 2 and 3 and groups from schools and nurseries are invited to experience the environment for a day or more. Learning outcomes are linked to the national curriculum, including the foundation stage and early learning goals. Learning activities are designed to enhance children's experience of the forest environment and help them to develop their knowledge and understanding of the world.

Example 2: support from manufacturers and the development of a software package for independent learning

British Gas Engineering Academy: CoVE in gas installation and maintenance

The CoVE has excellent workshops and an extensive range of industry-standard resources. These provide learners with an outstanding off-the-job training experience in a realistic work environment. Training bays provide extensive and realistic workplace simulations such as 24 kitchens each with a full range of appliances, 24 lounges with gas fires and heating systems, 18 fire-back boilers, each with a series of radiators. There are more than 100 free-standing boilers, including high-efficiency condensing boilers, combination boilers, a wide range of commercial systems, warm-air hot water heaters, and un-vented hot water cylinders and systems. The CoVE receives significant amounts in sponsorship and donations from manufacturers and suppliers. Fully equipped mobile training and assessment units are used to update engineers' skills in the outlying districts. The CoVE has developed dedicated software. The software is in gamepad format and is a virtual reality package. Apprentices learn how to interact with customers, use tooling, and take readings in diagnosing faults and repairing complex appliances. On completion, learners receive feedback about their performances. The CoVE's software won the British Chamber Award for Technology and Innovation in 2004.

Example 3: developing international links

City College Birmingham: electrical industry CoVE

The CoVE has established productive links with colleges in Europe and the USA. The college has used its links with Cleveland, Chicago and Ohio in the USA to arrange for staff and learner exchanges and worksite visits. In the USA, employees in the electrical industry come from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds and include significant numbers of women. The CoVE has been influenced by this and it is now targeting non-traditional groups in its recruitment activities and has increased the number of female learners. The CoVE has broadened its curriculum, introducing subjects such as customer service, psychology and business management elements into the technical certificate.

Example 4: well-developed virtual learning environment

The College of North West London: CoVE in refrigeration, air conditioning and electrical installation.

Teachers have jointly developed schemes of work and teaching and learning resources which are accessible on the college's virtual learning environment. For example, in electrical installation there are schemes of work for every course, learning resources for each weekly topic, and self-assessment packages for learners. Most classrooms and workshops are equipped with interactive whiteboards so that teachers can simply download material from the college's virtual learning environment for each lesson. This ensures consistency between teachers and high-quality presentations, as well as ready access to learning materials and practical projects. Learners can also access these resources from home or their workplace.

Example 5: high-quality interactive learning environment

Middlesbrough College: CoVE in hospitality and catering

The CoVE has invested in a high-quality practical demonstration lecture theatre with tiered seating. College teachers and guest chefs give practical cooking demonstrations. Their work can be filmed for later study and analysis. The CoVE has invested in a good range of industry-standard equipment, including refrigeration units, kitchen ventilation, specialised pastry ovens and a wide variety of small equipment. One kitchen is equipped with adjustable workbenches and sinks for wheelchair users. A dedicated IT mini-resource centre has 36 computers. Teachers' knowledge and skills have been updated through a range of exchange visits to high-quality restaurants in the UK and abroad. Teachers have attended weekend courses in Penrith, for bakery skills, and in Sienna, for Italian cookery.

Example 6: increased contributions by manufacturers and suppliers

Northumberland College: CoVE in construction crafts

Approximately £700,000 has been secured through LSC co-financed projects. This has enabled the CoVE to build a new gas assessment centre, develop a refrigeration and air-conditioning training facility and expand the range of training centres and provision across the county. In addition to the two pre-CoVE centres at Ashington and Berwick, the CoVE has established a centre at Amble and one which is shortly to open in Prudhoe to the west of the county. The CoVE now covers a wide geographical area and the new training centres offer considerable benefits to learners and their employers. Each CoVE course is linked to a major manufacturer or supplier. This provides a planned annual programme of visiting technical lecturers. For example, a national adhesives manufacturing company provides demonstrations, product development and technical lectures to learners in most trade areas. Manufacturers of ceramic tiles, floor coverings, plaster, plaster boards, ceiling fixings and paints provide similar support to CoVE learners. Most groups of learners receive three days of technical support each year. Most manufacturers also provide a range of materials, tools and equipment to the CoVE. One European floor covering manufacturer has taken a group of CoVE staff to its plant in Germany to be trained in engineered flooring systems. An international refrigeration and air-conditioning manufacturer has supplied all the new plant and equipment for the new training facility at Ashington. A UK refrigeration and air-conditioning installation company is providing an instructor to teach the subject until the provision is established.

AIM 7: Responsive delivery models

Care CoVEs provide good examples of innovation and flexibility in meeting the needs of employers. The range of provision has been adapted effectively to meet the changing needs of the sector and teachers have been recruited for specialisms such as dementia training and infection control, passenger assisted training and foot-care training. CoVEs have increased the flexibility of NVQ programmes to meet the needs of employed learners. Training is provided to fit in with shift patterns, including weekends, and is offered in the workplace. Many CoVEs provide a wide range of short, non-accredited courses in such areas as food hygiene, first aid for young children, and sign language. Inflexibility in the organisation of some full-time courses restricts the involvement and progress of some learners. Some CoVEs have no provision during vacation periods and only allow learners to start at the beginning of an academic year.

In half of the ICT CoVEs surveyed there has been considerable tailoring of the curriculum to meet employers' needs. New modes of delivery have been developed on- and off-site, including various models of e-learning and distance learning. In a third of the CoVEs visited, such innovations were limited. Most CoVEs have introduced a virtual learning network, but these are at an early stage of development. It has not always been possible to gain accreditation for the mixture of skills training that employers need. A pioneering hybrid IT Champion qualification, developed for small- and medium-sized enterprises at Lewisham College, has not yet been recognised by an awarding body.

In hospitality CoVEs, bespoke, part-time programmes have been developed to meet employers' needs and often include components from different qualifications. Examples of these include company-specific NVQs at level 2 and 3 contextualised courses, Japanese cooking, and Asian culinary arts. Changes have been made to course organisation in order, for example, to reduce the time it takes learners to reach level 3 or, in response to requests from employers, to increase the time learners spend on occupational skills. However, in a third of hospitality CoVEs surveyed, there has not been enough development of flexible provision.

In construction CoVEs, flexible attendance includes full-time, part-time, day-release and evening options, and roll-on and roll-off arrangements. Work-based routes are not fully established in one CoVE.

Most engineering CoVEs offer a good range of flexible modes of attendance to meet the requirements of learners and employers, including training on employers' premises. Apprenticeship programmes have been developed on a block-release basis and other programmes, such as electrical inspection and testing, have been introduced in response to employers' requests. In two of the CoVEs surveyed there was little variation on one main model of delivery.

Example 1: providing support in gaining recognition of existing skills

NETA Training: CoVE in engineering construction

The CoVE has developed a programme known as assuring competence in engineering construction (ACE). A dedicated building with classrooms and offices has been funded by the CoVE. The programme enables experienced, employed adults to gain recognition of their existing skills and develop new skills. Employers who use the programme are encouraged to provide their own assessors and make use of the CoVE facilities. Adults are assessed for their existing competences and provided with additional training to top up their competences to the standard required for a level 3 qualification. The main focus is on accrediting existing skills. The programme is well used by employers.

Example 2: developing a productive relationship with an employer

North Devon College: CoVE in manufacturing and manufacturing support services

Staff have worked in close collaboration with a local, medium-sized engineering employer to provide NVQ training for the adult workforce. Approximately 50 per cent of the shop floor staff now have an NVQ at level 1 and/or level 2. All new entrants to the company work towards gaining a level 1 NVQ within six months of joining. Employees' work is assessed and verified by in-company staff who are trained and mentored by CoVE staff. Employees are subsequently given options to change their job roles and gain an additional level 1 NVQ related to the new skills. Many employees progress to level 2 NVQs, also with the option for a change of job role and an additional NVQ. Employees working towards NVQs receive training on the shop floor before the planned assessment of their developing skills. Employees value the opportunities to move around various sections of the factory and to gain formal qualifications in more than one specific skill. CoVE staff visit the company on a weekly basis as internal verifiers and to provide advice and guidance to training managers and assessors. CoVE staff have worked with training managers to promote and share the company's training strategy with three other local engineering companies. The practice is also to be shared with a 'sister' company in Derby and CoVE staff plan to work with the staff at Derby College.

Example 3: flexible response to the needs of a particular company

Telford College of Arts and Technology: CoVE in engineering and maintenance skills for manufacturing process industries.

CoVE staff have recently completed an NVQ 2 programme in engineering maintenance for mature employees at a local food manufacturing company. All the training and assessment was carried out in-house. Training took place on actual process equipment that was made available during periods when production had been halted and equipment from the production line was also brought into the training room. This flexible approach was much appreciated by the company and made the learning experience more realistic. Participants were team leaders needing to develop skills in identifying problems, recommending solutions and carrying out routine engineering tasks that would normally require a maintenance engineer. Learners felt that the programme had given them new confidence in making operational decisions on the production line, such as machine-setting.

Example 4: modified programmes to meet employers' and learners' needs

Thanet College: CoVE in hospitality and catering

The CoVE has a fast-track scheme which allows employees who already have skills, but no qualifications, to attend college for 3 days and work for 2 days each week. This allows them to complete an NVQ at level 2 in food preparation and cooking within 6 months. Another initiative, entitled the 'CHIPs' programme, has been developed in collaboration with five employers. Learners attend the CoVE for a level 2 NVQ course on a day-release basis. Their work at college is directly linked to their work at their place of employment. If the learners are working on filleting fish in college they will also be preparing and cooking fish in their workplace kitchens. The programme includes additional training, requested by individual employers, such as intermediate food hygiene and customer care skills. Certificates of achievement carry the CHIPs logo and the CoVE is seeking formal accreditation of the programme.

AIM 8: Employers' perceptions

Employers in the care sector hold CoVE provision in high regard. The work of CoVEs has enabled employees to develop confidence in their work roles and to significantly improve the standard of care being offered. Many employers make good use of CoVEs as a recruitment source. Good progress has been made in changing the attitude of employers and engaging them in training activities. Employers can appreciate the value in the skills development of their workforces, and they are aware of regulatory targets for gaining qualifications. However, some employers are reluctant to release staff for training, or to pay training fees.

In ICT, employers' feedback about the quality of the training provided by CoVEs is very positive. However, in a third of the CoVEs surveyed, employers have a poor awareness of the CoVE brand. In some instances, surveys of CoVE learners and employers are too vague and are not analysed sufficiently to be of value.

Employers' perceptions of the work of hospitality CoVEs are very positive. There are high levels of satisfaction with the training provided. However, a third of the employers involved with the CoVEs surveyed had only a limited understanding of what CoVE status entails.

Construction employers have a positive view of the training provided by CoVEs and there have been significant improvements in employer participation and employee take-up of courses. Employers increasingly acknowledge the benefits of dealing with CoVEs and the good range of courses they offer. Employers feel that learners become suitably equipped for the world of work. In a quarter of the CoVEs visited, insufficient progress had been made in marketing the CoVE brand to employers.

Engineering employers are also generally impressed by the training offered by CoVEs. There has been a significant increase in the participation of employers and their employees in training, and in positive attitudes among employers about the quality and range of provision. Thirty-three per cent of the CoVEs visited have not promoted the CoVE brand sufficiently and there is limited awareness of its role among employers. The CoVE programme is not promoted effectively enough to smaller engineering businesses.

Example 1: CoVE recognition among employers

Blackburn College: CoVE in working with children.

The CoVE's effective work with employers has influenced training policies and practices. The CoVE has very active involvement with employers. It deals regularly with 91 employers, which is an increase from 64 employers in less than two years. A regular survey of employers is carried out by the CoVE. Employers are impressed with, and value, the CoVE training, particularly its flexibility and responsiveness to their needs. A wide range of employer events is organised and 41 of 59 employers interviewed were aware of the CoVE's status as a centre of excellence. Many employers make good use of the CoVE as a recruitment pool.

Example 2: a good experience leads to further requests for training

North Trafford College: CoVE in gas services installation

Employers' experience of a high-quality, professional service from the CoVE has prompted requests to extend training, and to make use of other college departments. For example, construction employers have sent their administrative staff for training in business administration. Employers have expanded their training activities from gas to other services, such as electrical installation. There is a very positive attitude among employers and learners towards the quality of provision offered in the CoVE, and a number of employers have identified commercial benefits from their CoVE involvement.

CoVE learners' views

What learners like about studying in a CoVE

- excellent resources
- relaxed learning environment
- the opportunity to study locally
- the range of courses and qualifications
- interesting and up-to-date course content
- knowledgeable and approachable teachers
- high-quality teaching made relevant to employment
- teachers not being condescending to adult learners
- the opportunity to give feedback to teachers after training sessions
- good teaching support - 'they go out of their way to help you'
- useful feedback about assignments
- the variety of work placements and the good individual support provided

What learners think could be improved

- the amount of detail in pre-course advertising material and guidance given to support informed choices
- available cover for absent teachers
- the co-ordination of theory and practical sessions in construction and engineering courses
- the timing of assignments to ensure an evenly distributed workload
- the paperwork required to record NVQ evidence - too complex
- the availability of assessors to ensure timely assessment
- guidance on key skills tests and portfolios
- social space for meeting outside of classes
- opportunities to understand more about what the CoVE means

Data on CoVEs included in the survey

Granting of CoVE status

Skills area	Pathfinder	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Total
Hospitality & Catering	0	2	3	1	2	8
Care	0	1	2	2	1	6
Construction	0	3	3	1	1	8
Engineering	3	4	1	2	0	10
ICT	1	1	3	1	2	8
All	4	11	12	7	6	40

Institutional context

Skills area	GFE	PTP	HE	Consortia
Hospitality & Catering	5	2	1	2
Care	6	0	0	1
Construction	6	2	0	1
Engineering	5	5	0	0
ICT	8	0	0	2
All	30	9	1	6

GFE = General Further Education Colleges
PTP = Private Training Provider
HE = Higher Education Institution

LSC region

Skills area	London	NE	NW	SE	SW	YH	EM	WM	E	NCS
Hospitality & Catering	1	2	1	3	0	1	0	0	0	0
Care	0	0	2	0	3	0	1	0	0	0
Construction	2	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	1
Engineering	0	3	0	0	3	0	0	4	0	0
ICT	1	1	0	2	1	0	1	0	2	0
All	4	7	5	5	7	1	2	4	4	1

NCS = National Contracting Service

List of CoVEs involved in the survey

Avon Vale Training: engineering

Barnfield College: computer integrated networking systems

Bedford College: plumbing and gas services

Blackburn College: working with children

Boston College: early years care

Bridgwater College: early years care

British Gas Engineering Academy: gas installation and maintenance

Brockenhurst College, Totton College and Farnborough College: applied ICT for business

Bury College and Hopwood Hall College: early years care

City College Birmingham: electrical services

City College Norwich, College of West Anglia and Great Yarmouth College: Norfolk CoVE in computing and networking

College of North West London: construction

College of North West London: refrigeration, air-conditioning and electrical installation

Cornwall College: IT systems

Derby College: IT technicians

Hastings College of Arts and Technology: ICT for business

Hospitality Training Partnership Ltd: hospitality and catering skills

Hotel and Catering Training Company, Northbrook College and City College Brighton: Sussex Hospitality CoVE

Lewisham College: computing

Middlesbrough College: hospitality and catering

Midland Group Training Services Ltd: multi-skilled management of industrial electrical systems

NETA Training: engineering construction

Newcastle College: North East Institute of Culinary Excellence

North Devon College: manufacturing and manufacturing support services

North Lancashire Training Group: furniture manufacture

North Trafford College: gas services installation and maintenance

Northumberland College: construction crafts

Norton Radstock College: care academy

Peterborough Regional College and Cambridge Regional College: Cambridgeshire Construction CoVE

Rotherham College of Arts and Technology, Sheffield College, Doncaster College and Dearne Valley College: South Yorkshire Hospitality and Catering CoVE

S & B Training: Centre for the Training and Licensing of Truck Technicians

South Trafford College: catering and hospitality

South West Durham Training: High Tech Engineering

Sunderland College: ICT network systems

Telford College of Arts and Technology: engineering and maintenance skills for manufacturing process industries

Thames Valley University: catering

Thanet College: hospitality and catering

Truro College: care

Tyne Metropolitan College: mechatronics

Warwickshire College: general engineering

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