

The contribution made by centres of vocational excellence to the development of vocational work in schools

This report looks at how centres of vocational excellence in colleges support vocational work in schools, and considers their likely contribution to the development of the forthcoming 14 to 19 diplomas. It finds that they have contributed significantly to the quality and range of experience available to young people and increased their motivation, attendance and career aspirations. However, barriers to further development arise from uncertainties over future funding and the unwillingness of some schools to be involved.

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Executive summary

This is the report of a small-scale survey to find out how centres of vocational excellence (CoVEs) were supporting vocational work in schools and to identify barriers to developing this support. Where possible, inspectors considered how this support was likely to contribute to the forthcoming development of the new 14 to 19 diplomas.

Her Majesty's Inspectors and inspectors from the Adult Learning Inspectorate visited CoVEs, covering a wide range of vocational areas, in 24 further education colleges between October and December 2006. In an earlier electronic survey, these CoVEs had all indicated that they were involved in providing vocational courses for students from local schools and were working on developing the diplomas. In most cases, inspectors also met staff and students from the partner schools.

The achievement of 14 to 16 year old students on vocational courses provided in collaboration with CoVEs was good. The students were motivated by the work, they attended regularly, and many progressed to further study or training. The CoVEs were able to provide a wider range of high quality courses and more specialist equipment than would otherwise be possible. They cooperated well with partner schools to provide focused staff development for teachers in schools and colleges. Most of the CoVEs visited for the survey were taking the lead in their local areas in developing the new diplomas appropriate to their own specialisms.

Barriers to further development of this type of effective support for school-based students included uncertainty over future funding and the reluctance of some schools to develop links with other providers.

Key findings

- Where CoVES had worked with schools to provide vocational courses, they had contributed significantly to the quality and range of experience available to the young people.
- The motivation, attendance and achievement of 14 to 16 year old students had increased as a result of engaging in vocational programmes operated in conjunction with the CoVEs.
- Specialist equipment and resources acquired as a result of achieving CoVE status were made available to schools and were being well used.
- Collaboration between CoVEs and schools provided well focused and effective staff development for teachers in schools and colleges, but much more training and awareness-raising are needed to prepare for introducing diplomas.
- Links between specialist schools and CoVEs with the same or related vocational specialisms were still in the early stages of development.

- Uncertainties over future funding have created concerns about the long term sustainability and future development of collaborative provision between CoVEs and schools.
- In five of the areas visited, some schools had not developed links with other providers and were unaware of the potential support available from CoVEs.
- Where school and college timetables were not harmonised, access to CoVE provision was restricted for some students.
- All the colleges visited had taken a leading role in either preparing or supporting the submissions for the specialist diplomas in their areas, as a result of their vocational knowledge and skills. Where colleges had CoVEs with relevant specialisms, the CoVE was almost always leading the development of that particular diploma.

Recommendations

Colleges should:

- promote the benefits that CoVEs can bring more widely to the schools in their area and involve the local authorities in this work.

Colleges and schools should:

- undertake more systematic joint staff development to prepare for the diplomas
- with the support of the local authority, plan for sufficient harmonisation of timetables to maximise students' access to collaborative provision
- develop links between CoVEs and specialist schools with related vocational specialisms.

The Learning and Skills Council, local authorities, schools and colleges should:

- review the funding of link programmes to ensure that these are sustainable in the future and that funding is equitable for those involved.

The impact of effective CoVE support

1. The achievements of 14 to 16 year old learners studying at colleges through the CoVEs visited in the survey were good. On many courses all of the young people who completed their courses were successful in achieving their target qualifications. There were notable examples of success with previously disaffected young people; for example, two colleges which worked with pupil referral units reported high standards of work and good progress being made by those on the programmes.
2. Retention rates were high, with at least 90% of students completing the courses in 22 of the 24 colleges visited. Progression rates were also high, with

large numbers of young people moving on to post-16 provision, either at the college where they studied or another local college, or by undertaking related training. In one area, the numbers of young people who would have been classed as 'not in education, employment or training' dropped when the local college opened a motor vehicle training centre as part of its CoVE.

3. Attendance was very high on most of the CoVE courses for 14 to 16 year olds; this appeared to have a knock-on effect, with better attendance also noted for lessons in school. The schools involved with the CoVEs reported that students had greater self esteem and were better motivated, and that their aspirations had been raised. Many students, in following college programmes, had improved in other areas, such as teamwork and essential skills, and had achieved better results in their school subjects than those expected or predicted for them. This was in addition to the qualifications they obtained through the CoVE courses.
4. Working with the CoVE helped some students to move into appropriate employment on completion of their studies.

A large local and international employer in construction which works with the local college CoVE recognises the achievements of the learners with an award ceremony and publicity at its headquarters, and employs some of the learners on completion of their school courses.

Features contributing to effectiveness

Curriculum enhancement

5. All the colleges visited had well established programmes for learners aged 14 to 16 who attended college to study, in nearly all cases, at levels 1 and 2. These included a range of link courses, and provision by partnerships between schools, further education colleges and work-based learning providers set up under the Department for Education and Skills' Increased Flexibility Programme. Schools and colleges had designed these programmes together so that the curriculum was more closely matched to the needs of their learners and provided more appropriate vocational education and training.
6. The CoVES complemented the curriculum provision of their local schools and, in most cases, offered vocational opportunities that would not be otherwise available. This was particularly true where specialist facilities were needed, for example, in engineering, construction and digital media. They were also able to offer curriculum extension activities.

One media CoVE offers GCE AS courses in film studies and media to gifted and talented pupils from across the city. Many learners attend the twilight

sessions, using state of the art facilities made available through the CoVE. Many gain GCE AS passes alongside their GCSEs.

7. Through the CoVEs, innovative work was being done to develop the vocational curriculum with schools. There were examples of colleges providing a wide and varied range of courses in addition to the mainstream Key Stage 4 curriculum.

One college through its CoVE provides several qualifications for school learners at Key Stage 4. These include a vocational double award GCSE, an awarding body certificate in motor vehicle studies at level 1, an English as an Additional Language foundation certificate in engineering at level 1, the Young Apprenticeship programme and the teaching and assessment of six key skills by a college teacher at a school.

8. There were examples of helpful initiatives, where CoVE and school staff jointly developed new provision.

A joint scheme of work for motor vehicle studies has been produced by a school and college. The course is delivered jointly, partly at school and partly at college. A teacher from the school team-teaches and supports learners during their lessons at college; the school teacher was updated by CoVE teachers.

9. Some CoVEs had successfully tackled difficulties associated with providing relevant workplace experience for younger students.

The college faces some access problems because of health and safety regulations when it wishes to take young learners into some workplaces. It has responded to this both by working with people in industry to establish how these barriers can be removed and by designing and developing specific resources to simulate industrial conditions within its food technology CoVE. In some cases, the industry has helped the college with this by providing specialist equipment and technical support.

Staffing and resources

10. Schools and colleges were working effectively together to develop the skills of teachers involved with the CoVEs. In 16 of the colleges, teachers had received appropriate training to prepare them to teach students aged 14 to 16, and teachers from participating schools had also received up-to-date training in the specialist vocational areas.

Four engineering CoVE teachers from one college undertook a BTEC course to develop skills for teaching 14 to 16 year olds. This involved attendance at day placements and shadowing teachers in a school.

In another college with a CoVE in ICT systems, its CoVE teachers received training in behaviour management techniques for learners aged 14 to 16,

while the CoVE updated school teachers on technical skills to help them teach computer-aided design at school.

11. CoVE funding enabled colleges to develop excellent resources to support learning and teaching which were well used by the schools.

One college opened a full training nursery and its CoVE set up a virtual learning environment for health and social care and early years, to support the delivery of specialised units.

Most CoVEs had invested well in developing industry-standard learning environments. Construction and engineering CoVEs, in particular, had been able to update their equipment.

12. In some cases, CoVEs supported the development of resources and expertise within partner schools.

New construction facilities in the school are of a high standard and were designed by staff at the college. Teachers from the CoVE travel to the school to provide practical and theoretical tuition in carpentry and decorating for a new pilot GCSE in construction. They are also joined by technology teachers from the school. In Year 11 the students will cover electrical and plumbing studies. Students now have an opportunity to practise and understand the skills that are required to be successful within the construction industry, and how their general subjects can be placed in the context of the world of work.

13. Information Technology (IT) CoVEs provided good examples of IT being successfully used to develop the teaching and learning resources, materials and skills of staff, as in the following example:

A member of staff from the CoVE team teaches at a school to develop the skills of the school teacher in providing specialist IT courses, and in one area there are plans for the CoVE's teaching materials to be made available to all schools through the college intranet. The college, through its CoVE, lent laptops to a school and provided a teacher to deliver the Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education and A-level business courses in the school.

Some IT CoVEs successfully taught IT qualifications to IT teachers and technicians from their local schools, for example the European computer driving licence and specialist Cisco courses.

14. Some of the CoVEs visited provided access for 14 to 16 year olds to very specialised equipment and resources.

One land-based college has very good specialist resources that it makes available to support a land-based diploma. Examples of such resources that are directly attributable to its CoVE status include the mechanical horse, a virtual learning environment that is part of a rural enterprise centre and the extension to the indoor riding arena.

15. Other CoVEs provided access to particular expertise.

Through its Digital & Broadcast Media Technicians CoVE, one college was able to bring in the expertise of current practitioners, some of whom were of national standing, to enhance learning and the experiences provided for the learners. The relationship between the college and local schools is very good and a respected advanced skills teacher from a local school teaches at the CoVE.

Information, advice and guidance

16. Information and guidance to students, given as part of the information provided at options meetings, was generally clear and well received. CoVE staff typically took part in careers events in schools, provided taster days in college and vocational information sessions for Year 9 learners. These events were successful in raising younger learners' awareness of vocational pathways. However, impartial information, advice and guidance to learners and parents in relation to the diplomas has yet to be developed.
17. There were examples of particularly effective support for school students following vocational college courses, as in the case of a CoVE which provided for large numbers of 14 to 16 year olds.

A 14 to 16 curriculum co-ordinator plays a key role in supporting students, acting as an advocate for them, monitoring their behaviour and progress, offering support and referring them for advice if necessary. Well developed systems for tracking students' progress, attendance and behaviour keep the schools informed. Trained school mentors are present in all lessons – not necessarily supporting students from their own school. The youth workers used by the college play a role in supporting and monitoring school pupils in college – helping them to modify their behaviour and become more independent and mature.

18. The CoVEs had helped to establish clear progression pathways for learners. Learners attending the courses run within the CoVEs had benefited from gaining relevant information about, and experience of, the industry to help them in choosing their next steps.

Leadership and management

19. The CoVEs in this survey had established good partnership links with their local schools, and communications between them and the schools were effective and productive. In general, the schools reported that the colleges and their CoVEs supported them in offering their learners more appropriate provision.
20. Well developed consortium arrangements were in place in most of the CoVEs visited, and the CoVEs had either fitted in effectively or helped to develop the existing arrangements through their specialist skills and links with employers. In some areas, sound protocols for partnership working had already been agreed. These protocols and local agreements provided a good basis for developing further partnership working and the diplomas. Despite the good links between schools and colleges in particular areas, some schools did not wish to participate in joint developments. Some preferred to wait and see how diplomas developed, while others, mainly with sixth form provision, had been reluctant to take part in joint working. However, where local authorities had taken a strong lead in promoting this, collaboration and developments were successful.
21. The CoVEs visited had clear management structures and links with their local schools, in most cases through a designated, often senior, manager. The approach of principals of colleges and headteachers was supportive. In nearly all cases, while maintaining a strategic overview, they delegated responsibility to a senior manager to take forward operational matters and maintain close liaison between the schools and managers. The resources which were identified as part of the CoVE bid for working with schools were used appropriately. In some cases, the CoVEs had helped to bring in other funding. One CoVE had brought in extra monies through the European Social Fund, the London Development Agency, the Cultural Industries Development Agency and the European Regional Development Fund to develop resources and run projects – for example, a group project for local students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Preparation for the new diplomas

22. In all of the CoVEs visited, the CoVE teachers were closely involved in preparing for the diplomas. In many areas, they were members of curriculum advisory/development groups which had been established to develop the 14 to 19 curriculum and, within this, the diplomas. Through the CoVE, they had established links with employers, the specialist development groups and sector skills councils. This had enabled them to take the lead in preparing the submissions for the diplomas with their local authorities.
23. Schools' involvement in preparing for the diplomas has been mainly through senior staff or individuals given the specific responsibility. Apart from those who

worked with the colleges, most staff appeared to have limited knowledge about the role of CoVEs and the diplomas.

24. Although, in most areas, preparation for the new diplomas was at a very early stage, there were a few examples of more forward-looking developments.

The partnership currently caters for a group of Year 10 students on a two-year, ESF-funded pre-apprenticeship programme in the health line of learning which has been developed as a forerunner for the diploma in society, health and development. The programme is being used to model diploma delivery at level 1 and level 2 to prepare the ground for launching the diploma in 2008. Each of the four schools in the partnership teaches the double applied GCSE in health and social care to their own students as part of their main school curriculum. The students can then attend the college, which has a CoVE in care, for one day a week, to complete a BTEC first certificate, alongside other vocationally relevant qualifications such as a first aid certificate. The college expects that, in the first cohort of diploma students, there will be 20 students at each of levels 1 and 2. The current pre-apprenticeship group will be well prepared to take the diploma at level 3. This is an excellent example of thorough preparation for the diploma because it is fit for purpose, provides clear progression pathways, including into higher education, and is supported by the excellent resources in the CoVE.

25. Specific links between the specialisms of schools and CoVEs were undeveloped. In the survey, only one CoVE and school with the same vocational specialism (in information technology) were building links based on that specialism. The two institutions shared resources, including staffing, were developing teaching and learning materials together and establishing links with industry.
26. Employers' involvement in the specific work the CoVEs did with schools varied. Employers were not yet fully involved in diploma development work, and work with the sector skills councils was generally progressing slowly, although there were examples of good engagement. One CoVE consortium had good involvement from SEMTA, the sector skills council for science, engineering and manufacturing technologies, and from City and Guilds, in their development of the diploma in engineering.

Barriers to effective collaboration

27. The lack of clarity about future funding was considered to be a potential barrier to further development of a more collaborative 14 to 19 vocational curriculum. At present, many colleges subsidise their work with schools. Schools which contributed to the funding were also concerned about the sustainability of the work. A further concern was the lack of clear strategies for funding additional

learning support where several different providers were involved in delivering courses.

28. Both the funding and the provision of transport in sparsely populated rural areas were cited during the survey as significant barriers to schools participating with CoVEs, and with other providers more generally, in developing 14 to 19 provision.
29. In nearly all cases, students aged 14 to 16 travelled to the college for the course or courses they were following. In some areas, moves were being made, as part of the progression towards diplomas, to harmonise timetables, but formal development was still at a very early stage. Where a CoVE designed a programme for students from several schools whose timetables were not coordinated, some students were unable to take part.
30. Although joint staff development had taken place, there were concerns about whether teachers in schools had the level of vocational knowledge and expertise needed for the diplomas, particularly in relation to assessment and the depth of practical content. In view of the tight timescales, finding and funding the necessary staff development were major concerns in some areas.
31. A few of the colleges reported that some schools were denying their more academic learners an equal opportunity to choose a vocational pathway. There were also concerns about the status of vocational qualifications if many schools continued to channel students who were considered less academically able into vocational programmes.

Notes

Since 2002, over 400 CoVEs have been awarded to further education colleges and other training providers. The purpose of CoVEs is to develop high quality vocational provision and training to meet the current and future needs of the local area. To do this, colleges work in partnership with employers, businesses and other stakeholders to improve the skills and training opportunities of the workforce. The White Paper on 14–19 education and skills stated:

‘We will increase the capacity of the education system to offer vocational education. We will do so by building on existing strengths – for example, extending the role of Centres of Vocational Excellence to making excellent vocational provision available for young people.’¹

¹ Paragraph 20 of the Executive Summary in *14–19 Education and skills* (Cm 6476), presented to Parliament February 2005.

Specialist development groups were set up to share knowledge between teachers and employers, and develop and disseminate good practice in accordance with the philosophy of the CoVE programme. The specialist development groups are a key mechanism by which the sector skills councils can engage employers and the appropriate industries in designing the curriculum, especially the 14 to 19 diploma courses.

Further information

Publications

White Paper on 14–19 education and skills (Cm 6476), presented to Parliament February 2005; available from www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/14-19educationandskills/

Centres of vocational excellence in practice: a survey report on 40 CoVEs in five skills sectors (report by the Adult Learning Inspectorate and Ofsted), ALI, 2005; available from www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/20071009

The Key Stage 4 curriculum: increased flexibility and work-related learning (ref. no. 070113), Ofsted, 2007; available from www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/2665

Websites

Learning and Skills Council
www.cove.lsc.gov.uk

The Learning and Skills Development Agency
now known as
The Learning and Skills Network
www.lsneducation.org.uk/cove

Annex

Centres of vocational excellence visited for this survey

College	CoVE
Accrington and Rossendale College, Lancashire	Construction
Askham Bryan College, York	Food chain technology
Barking College, Essex	Care; construction
Barnfield College, Luton	Health and social care
Bishop Burton College, East Yorkshire	Agriculture and equine
Boston College, Lincolnshire	Early years care
Bradford College, West Yorkshire	Beauty and complementary therapies
Cornwall College	ICT networking
Croydon College	Food preparation; building services
Darlington College	Digital media; hospitality and catering
Dudley College of Technology, West Midlands	Engineering and manufacturing
Henley College, Coventry	Computing and e-skills
Highbury College, Portsmouth	Gas installation; business services
Knowsley Community College, Liverpool	Construction; health and social care; Events management
Manchester College of Arts and Technology	Construction; automotive studies
New College Durham	Construction
Newham Sixth Form College, London	Digital and broadcast media technicians
Southgate College, London	ICT
Suffolk College, Ipswich	Care
Tameside College, Lancashire	Engineering
Telford College of Arts and Technology, Shropshire	Engineering
Warwickshire College, Royal Leamington Spa, Rugby and Moreton Morrell	Construction; engineering
West Cheshire College	Automotive; health and social care
Weston College, Somerset	Hospitality