

Identifying good practice: a survey of college provision in agriculture, horticulture and animal care

This report presents factors which enable post-16 learners to make good progress in the sector subject area of agriculture, horticulture and animal care. Between November 2006 and March 2007, inspectors visited 22 colleges where provision had been judged to be good or outstanding at their last inspection. Examples of good practice are given and recommendations for further improvement are made.

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Executive summary

Between July 2006 and March 2007, five inspectors visited 22 colleges where Ofsted had identified good or outstanding provision at their most recent inspection. The survey was conducted to identify features which enabled post-16 learners to make good progress in agriculture, horticulture and animal care. Throughout this report the term 'land-based provision' is used to cover these subject areas collectively.

In the provision visited success rates had nearly all improved since inspection to above or well above national averages. In almost all cases, retention rates had improved significantly. The high standard of students' practical skills, such as in handling animals and plant production, had been at least sustained in all provision. The emphasis on developing employability skills to meet industry needs had been strengthened by even more effective liaison with employers.

Tutors continued to show considerable technical skill and a good awareness of current industry practices and issues. In nearly all provision, they had improved their practice by making good use of a wider range of teaching techniques and developing more creative and imaginative approaches to engaging and motivating their students. In the best provision, this had a considerable impact on the quality of teaching of theory, which had improved.

Practical teaching played a very important part in nearly all the provision visited. Because of the very good land-based resources and the many learning opportunities these presented, this teaching was highly rated by students and often of a very high quality. Information and learning technology was used in lessons to a far greater degree than demonstrated by previous inspection evidence. However, some shortcomings still exist, particularly in the limited use of electronically filed data on animal and land resources for learning purposes.

Curriculum development had ensured an improved match of courses to student needs, especially through the now widespread use of foundation level courses. This also promoted better progression routes at lower levels. Progression into employment or further study had continued to improve. With several notable exceptions, promotion of the principles of environmental sustainability to students, over and above where this naturally occurred within the curriculum, was limited.

Support for students had improved through better monitoring of progress and stronger academic support. Much had also been done to improve retention, particularly by ensuring that the content, context and demands of courses were explained clearly at the outset. The identification of and support for students at risk of underperformance was also an area of good practice, through the effective use of personal tutors and robust tutorial systems.

Leadership and management of provision were strong in many cases. Productive collaboration with stakeholders had ensured that the strong links which already

existed with the land-based sector were constantly reinforced and extended. This very effective collaborative approach extended to links with schools where significant work has been done to promote land-based study to pupils aged 14–16. Some of this work was innovative and exciting, resulting in considerable numbers of pupils gaining an insight into land-based learning.

The sharing of good practice across subject teams was increasing with a number of effective initiatives becoming well established, although the wider sharing of good practice, across departments or throughout the colleges or with other land-based providers, remained limited. Self-assessment reports varied in quality but generally identified areas of strength accurately. However, evaluation of good practice that led to these strengths was rarely undertaken systematically. Insufficient emphasis was placed on measuring the progress that students made compared with their prior attainment during their time at college.

Key findings

In the land-based provision surveyed, the following contributed to improvements in the quality of provision and improved outcomes for students:

- Successful actions to improve retention, especially at level 3, had resulted in improved success rates in the majority of the colleges sampled.
- Experienced subject specialist tutors, many of whom have considerable technical skills, played a key role in the development of practical skills and in preparing students for employment in the land-based sector.
- The colleges visited had improved the quality of lessons by focusing closely on improving learning. This was particularly so in theory lessons which had been a weaker element of teaching and learning in the past.
- Information and learning technology was being used in increasingly creative and imaginative ways using high quality learning resources.
- The colleges visited have maintained and developed further a broad, land-based curriculum. Many also supported the provision of courses in a number of smaller specialist subject areas, such as saddlery.
- All the colleges visited had good physical resources and an extensive range of animals; in many cases these two aspects were excellent. In the very best practice, the link between the commercial aspects of these land-based resources and teaching and learning was extremely well managed and highly productive for students.
- In nearly all provision, an emphasis was placed on ensuring practical competence and employability, including the ability to work at industrial speed to high commercial standards.
- All the colleges visited collaborated very well with stakeholders in the land-based sector and allied industries.
- Land-based curriculum areas worked very effectively with schools, and in many different ways. This has promoted considerable interest in land-based study and has helped many pupils to achieve success in land-based vocational qualifications and progress to full-time courses post-16.

The survey identified aspects which needed further development, even though the overall quality was good or better.

- The sharing of good practice within departments, across colleges and with other land-based providers remains limited.
- The use of information and learning technology (ILT) to maintain records of animals and land is limited. Most records are still held manually, reducing opportunities for students to increase their knowledge and use of ILT.

- Self-assessment reports, although fairly accurate, did not always evaluate aspects of good practice effectively, especially in teaching and learning.
- In most provision, the promotion of the principles of environmental sustainability through the curriculum was very limited, other than where this topic appeared as part of a set syllabus.
- Measurement of the progress made by different groups of students and the value added in vocational courses was underdeveloped.

Recommendations

The survey identified many aspects of good practice in the land-based departments visited. To improve further the quality of provision, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), together with the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA), should:

- provide support and staff development for colleges to develop and implement policies to promote environmental awareness in all provision
- help colleges to develop self assessment to recognise, evaluate and share good practice more effectively.

Where necessary, colleges should:

- promote the principles of environmental sustainability throughout all land-based provision and within colleges as a whole
- develop systems for maintaining animal and physical resource records using ILT
- measure the progress made by different groups of students and the value that is added during vocational courses more thoroughly.

Background

1. Nine of the colleges visited were designated as specialist land-based colleges, two were higher education institutions which offer further education provision and the remainder were general further education colleges.
2. Provision in specialist land-based colleges was of a higher quality generally, based on previous inspection findings, than in other college contexts. Of the sample visited, with the exception of one graded subject area, all the subject areas graded outstanding were in specialist land-based colleges and, of the whole sample of 43 good or better subject area grades in 22 colleges, nearly two thirds of these grades were awarded in specialist colleges.
3. The numbers of students overall in each curriculum area showed improving recruitment levels to land-based courses. Notably, recruitment to courses in

agriculture and horticulture had increased and the numbers of pupils aged 14–16 attending courses had improved in all of the colleges visited.

4. Physical resources to support learning in land-based subjects are extensive and in many cases operated commercially. Resources are often based on an extensive estate, in a few cases of over 750 hectares, and often include specialist units such as equine and animal centres to support different aspects of land-based provision. Residential accommodation is a common feature, partly because of the rural location of a number of colleges and especially where agriculture or equine courses are offered, in order to support students in undertaking work related duties outside of the college day.

Factors contributing to good quality provision

Achievement and standards

5. Success rates had improved in the majority of provision and most rates were above or well above national averages. This was often because of considerable improvement in the numbers of students who stayed on until the end of their courses. In most colleges, close attention had been given to improving retention and a wide range of initiatives had been put in place to achieve this. However, in a minority of colleges, some concerns still remained, especially on animal care and equine courses.
6. Standards of practical work were good in nearly all provision. As a result, most students found it easy to progress into either employment or further study. A significant number progressed to a land-based higher education course. This was often at the same college as the provision of land-based higher education courses was a common feature, especially in specialist land-based colleges.
7. In self-evaluation, too much emphasis was often placed on the results that students gained in externally accredited qualifications and not enough on the progress made by each student during their time at the college. It was rare for prior attainment and the results of initial assessment to be used to devise challenging target grades for students to work towards. It was even rarer for any assessment to be made of the added value brought to each student's programme of study. The analysis of the performance of different groups of students was also ineffective and not widely undertaken.
8. Colleges gave high priority to celebrating student success and prizes awarded for livestock. This included external competitions and events, and special awards evenings, as well as recognition through newsletters and displays of trophies and shields.

Teaching and learning

9. In all provision, managers and tutors demonstrated a clear focus on sustaining and improving the quality of teaching and, especially, learning. The requirement to acquire formal teaching qualifications had resulted in considerable attention to the improvement of generic teaching skills and had broadened the experience of land-based tutors.
10. In most provision, teaching was carried out by technically well qualified tutors who were often experts in their subject areas and still practising, for example, as veterinary surgeons. Many were still taking an active part in either commercial or competitive aspects of their subject areas, such as by designing gardens or by training horses and competing regularly. Tutors demonstrated a passion and strong commitment to their subject areas and used their own research and experiences to enhance lessons. As a result, students often used tutors as role models and aspired to match their knowledge and competence in the specialist field in which they were studying. Tutors were particularly effective in making sure that students used technical language appropriately and developed their specialist vocabulary well.
11. A strong emphasis was placed on developing and using creative and imaginative teaching methods such as the use of games and quizzes. Some of this was the result of making good use of learning materials based on those developed by the former Department for Education and Skills' Standards Unit. In addition, a common feature was the high quality of learning materials. In the best examples these were well produced, reviewed regularly and, in a few cases, held centrally to ensure that they were readily available for future lessons. Materials were often designed to ensure plenty of participative work in lessons.
12. The teaching of theory in lessons had improved where tutors made very strong links between background knowledge and its practical application. Careful planning of the timetable ensured that opportunities for strengthening this link were maximised. In the best examples, a classroom had been provided close to practical units, such as to a stable yard, to allow easy movement between theory and practical aspects.
13. The teaching of practical skills to improve employability was strong in almost all the providers visited. An emphasis was placed on 'real' work experience and students often undertook realistic work programmes in specialist units such as farms, including morning, evening and weekend duties, similar to the level and commitment expected in employment. This often resulted in a substantial involvement of students in the actual work of college commercial units. The use of more experienced students as supervisors during duty sessions helped them to develop their employability skills. A key part of the overall assessment of this work involved assessment by employers and commercial managers.

14. All colleges made very good use of a very wide range of learning opportunities in internal and external events in the land-based sector. These included involvement with competition work at national level through taking part in events such as the Chelsea Flower Show and livestock classes at county shows, as well as demonstrating their work through college events such as open days and stock shows.

Learning opportunities in a college-based public event

Several colleges ran annual livestock shows which were open to all students and which included judging by external professionals to industry standards. These events required a considerable period of preparation, often of several months, where students had the opportunity to learn a wide range of husbandry skills to ensure that animals were trained correctly and produced for show in good condition. In addition, production techniques such as grooming and trimming were used by students to produce a high quality end result. These events were usually open to the public as part of college open days and provided a valuable showcase for students' work, as well as promoting the image of the land-based sector.

15. The teaching of key skills had become a strength in several colleges where it was well integrated and made more meaningful to students. This was often as a result of very productive work by vocational tutors to integrate literacy, numeracy or the use of information technology into a vocational context, supported by key skills specialists. In the best examples, lessons and other learning activities were used very effectively to develop wider key skills providing evidence to support accreditation. However, in a number of cases, this type of approach was still at an early stage and opportunities to maximise the learning of key skills in a land-based context continued to be neglected.

Examples of effective learning and assessment of key skills

In one college, all students worked towards the wider key skill of 'improving own learning and performance'. They used evidence of planning, performing, personal reflection and self-evaluation from their roles in a number of college events, such as a 'lambing weekend' which was attended by over 10,000 people, and run largely by students. In addition, their work in carrying out routine animal and estate duties as well as charitable and community work contributed to high success rates.

16. In nearly all the provision visited, significant improvements had taken place in the use of ILT. Its use was promoted increasingly in lessons and through other learning activities.

Examples of the use of ILT in learning

In one college a weekly farm diary was produced which incorporated data about milk production, animal records and crop yields from the college farm. This was available to students electronically and was used well as a basis for assignments and for studying trends in production levels.

Another college held a regularly updated and well presented database of plants with details of their identification, including Latin names, and their location on the college estate. This was accessible to students in the library and remotely, and helped them to become familiar with technical terms.

A number of colleges used webcams very effectively to record animal behaviour and to make this available through an intranet. This was used effectively to record the behaviour of meerkats in one college. Webcams were also used to record behaviour patterns for wild animals such as badgers, and in several cases live recordings were also made available to schools linked to each college.

Several colleges had produced DVDs of different aspects of learning in land-based provision. These included coverage of equine physiology and anatomy and the evaluation of horses ridden. One college had produced a health and safety course, tailored specifically for equine students, as a CD that could be studied by distance learning.

17. In a minority of colleges, the development of Web-based virtual learning environments with remote access supported the use of ILT considerably. With one or two exceptions, where this technology was used it contained little useful material or was not used well by either tutors or students. In far too many cases the development of electronic recording systems for animal or land records to allow easy access and to mirror best practice in industry was well behind schedule. Students and staff used manual records, which were often of poor quality.
18. Arrangements to ensure that assessment was rigorous and used well to support learning were strong in almost all the colleges visited. Good practice was evident in the quality assurance arrangements used to ensure that assessment was relevant, rigorous and helped students to improve their work. Assessment was particularly effective when tasks involved realistic challenges which made use of land-based resources within each college. Equally valuable was the use of self- or peer-evaluation as part of assessment. In several colleges, very useful work books, especially for practical skill development, had been developed to track assessments and monitor progress in routine duties and other practical sessions.

Examples of good practice in assessment

In one college, practical projects in agriculture included a project where students produced a significant proportion of the farm's silage crop and, in horticulture, students were contracted to grow plants for the garden centre. In both cases the outcomes of these projects had to meet very high quality commercial standards of production. As part of the assessment, students had to plan and undertake both tasks from start to finish, including budgeting and meeting a challenging timescale. The projects also required considerable teamwork. In both cases, students successfully met the targets set and their work was rated highly by assessors.

In a number of colleges, the use of peer- and self-evaluation was being promoted very effectively, promoting skills of analysis and evaluation and helping students to generate their own improvement targets. For example, in riding lessons, students regularly evaluated their own performances and those of others; in routine duties, self-evaluation was included as part of assessment.

Resources

19. Physical resources were good in all the provision visited. Many cases were outstanding in their breadth, quality and management, meeting or exceeding industry standards. In several instances, colleges had introduced innovative approaches to resource use that had influenced practices in the land-based sector, such as the use of robotic milking machines or mechanical horses. Where animal or equine studies were part of the curriculum, the majority of colleges had a considerable range of animals, allowing students to gain wide experience of different types and breeds. In nearly all colleges there was very effective management and use of physical resources, including estates and animals, linking both learning and commercial outcomes. This often promoted industrial involvement through sponsorship and donation of materials.

Examples of highly effective physical resource use in learning

A retail shop was part of the physical resource base in most floristry provision. This served as a focal point for learning and provided many opportunities for students to experience and practise the skills required of a florist. The operation of the shop often included buying flowers in bulk and storing them in a cold storage room, as well as dealing directly with customers, taking and completing orders and making sales, covering a very wide range of floral requirements. Balloon work was nearly always included, offering a further dimension to the outlet. In one college, a well managed shop provided flowers for courses run at several college centres across London, which involved detailed planning to meet demand.

In one college, the campus was used to showcase a large number of demonstration gardens, which were designed by students and illustrated a range of different design techniques. These mini-gardens also incorporated materials and accessories such as conservatories or paving slabs from commercial sponsors and were open to the public alongside the college gardens.

In a number of colleges which offered agricultural courses, students prepared college livestock or grew crops on the estate to enter regional and national competitions. This often involved considerable preparation and commitment to meet the exacting industry standards in show production. In many cases, students were successful and won trophies and other awards of significance. This work also helped to promote different breeds of animals effectively.

One college had pioneered the use of a mechanical horse to improve riding skills, especially for novice or nervous riders. Combined with well-developed exercises and individual instruction, this had proved very effective in developing coordination and technique in both inexperienced and experienced riders.

Curriculum development

20. The majority of colleges visited had ensured that the curriculum in each subject area was appropriate in terms of level, content and industrial relevance reflecting the latest legislative requirements. In several cases this had led to the development of tailored provision for specific land-based employer needs, such as in amenity horticulture for public parks or specialist animal care work such as greyhound welfare.
21. An important part of strengthening the curriculum was the addition of courses at Foundation Level in most land-based subject areas. These courses provided a much needed starting point for school pupils, for those with little experience of the land-based sector or for those with lower levels of prior attainment. Progression rates into further study had improved as a result. This addition has been a key factor in improving success rates at levels 2 and 3 as, too often in the past, students had been placed on unsuitable courses in terms of either vocational skill or prior attainment and had failed to succeed.
22. Nearly all the colleges visited were continuing to offer additional vocational qualifications relevant to students' future employability. The colleges were able to either fund or subsidise such courses as the safe use of veterinary medicines or pesticides. Acquiring additional qualifications brings considerable benefits to students in helping them secure work and develop broader technical skills. In the better colleges students undertook an additional qualification in first aid which was very relevant in an area of work which includes some high risk activities.

23. Quite a few colleges had taken a lead in maintaining specialist land-based provision, including sustaining small numbers in specialist areas such as game-keeping or saddlery. Other initiatives included promoting floristry to a younger age group and ensuring that provision was offered at several sites to assist access. Colleges had made considerable efforts to work jointly with industry to offer provision in external commercial settings, such as riding schools. This had proved successful in building up a rapport and strengthening links with local and regional industry.
24. The promotion of the principles of environmental sustainability was conducted at an early stage in the majority of the colleges. In a minority it featured strongly through awareness-raising groups, specific projects or as part of a college's mission. However, too often, not enough was done to raise its profile over and above where it occurred naturally in schemes of work, especially in animal care and equine courses.

Examples of effective promotion of environmental sustainability

In two colleges, countryside students undertook an additional qualification in environmental sustainability. For one of these colleges, this aspect of curriculum development had resulted in shortlisting for the 'Green Gown' award¹ in recognition of curriculum innovations to promote a green agenda. Other initiatives included development of the role of a designated sustainability officer, a cross-college sustainability group and a comprehensive sustainability policy which covered building, resources, campus management and curriculum delivery and content. This promoted cross-curricular environmental sustainability education and included an input on sustainability in induction.

25. The colleges visited had worked hard to promote aspects of equality and diversity across their provision. Although within the land-based curriculum there remain areas where this work could be further developed, for example in promoting the appreciation of plants and animals by different cultural groups, the overall promotion of this aspect was much improved. Activities incorporated into induction activities were often very effective in raising awareness about equality and diversity and, overall, land-based provision offered a very inclusive curriculum.
26. The range of subject-based enrichment available to students in all the provision sampled was good and often outstanding. It ranged from a vast array of highly

¹ A specialist land-based college, not visited as part of the sample chosen for this survey, was also short-listed for this award and subsequently won in the college category.

specialist visiting speakers to study visits and tours nationally and internationally.

Guidance and support

27. Support for students had frequently been judged to be a strength in land-based provision. Visits confirmed that this was still the case in nearly all provision. Pastoral care was usually the most effective element and often included very good care and support for residential students in specialist land-based colleges. All the colleges visited had strengthened academic support, in some cases considerably, including the monitoring of each student's progress. Good support was generally provided through regular tutorials with increasingly effective methods of recording outcomes and resulting actions. The role of group tutorials was taking on a higher profile, especially in supporting learning about healthy lifestyles and personal safety.
28. All the colleges visited undertook extensive initial assessment of key skills and vocational expertise. This information was recorded for individuals, but the extent to which it was used to good effect varied. In the best instances, combined with academic prior attainment information, it was used effectively to set very challenging targets and to establish predicted grades. This proved very useful in motivating students to improve and to measure how well they were doing in relation to their starting points.
29. The quality and effectiveness of target-setting had generally improved in the providers visited, with a clear distinction between short- and long-term targets.
30. Very thorough identification and monitoring of those students at risk of underperforming or withdrawing was a strong feature in the majority of providers. In most cases, through very good personal support and communication, tutors were able to pick up emerging concerns or issues early. This information was recorded carefully and communicated to others in teaching teams, and a range of support was put in place. This contributed significantly to improved retention rates.
31. As part of strategies to improve success rates, and especially to tackle some low levels of retention, nearly all providers had reviewed entry requirements and used very thorough interview procedures which often included taster sessions, skill assessments and detailed explanations of the course requirements, especially in relation to practical duties and work experience. This ensured that students received a realistic view of the course expectations and were more likely to stay and succeed. The details often covered practical points such as the cost of providing materials: for example, flowers for floristry students or personal protective equipment such as steel toe-capped boots for horticultural students.

32. Learning support provided after initial assessment was often well integrated into vocational areas, including, in one college, locating learning support assistants in specialist land-based units.

Leadership and management

33. There was a clear management focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning, although in a few cases a formal strategy did not exist. A rigorous lesson observation scheme to assess the quality of lessons was in place in all provision. This often included the use of external observers from local colleges to provide additional input. There were nearly always comprehensive moderation arrangements.
34. Much has been done to share good practice in teaching and learning, although in nearly all cases there was recognition by the colleges visited that there was more still to do. However, this was becoming a much stronger feature and a number of innovative and successful approaches were demonstrated by the colleges. Sharing of good practice was often particularly effective at subject level but less so at department or cross-college level. Over and above regular themed training days, other approaches included short regular opportunities for specialist tutors to share effective tips and techniques, which were often of a creative and imaginative nature.

Examples of effective sharing of good practice

In one college, an advanced teaching practitioner led regular short staff development sessions, where tutors brought examples of practical teaching techniques that they were using to share with others. These techniques were then used and evaluated by others with a view to maximising effective practice. This frequent activity prompted a culture of innovation and experimentation in teaching approaches and stimulated teachers to develop their practice effectively.

A 'learning fair' was used effectively in another college. This activity involved tutors showcasing their ideas for improving and innovating lessons. This encouraged tutors to share their ideas and build confidence in their own practice.

35. Staff development was a high priority in all provision, with a strong focus on improving teaching and learning. The use of subject learning coaches and advanced practitioners was widespread and effective. There was often good support for new tutors which included mentoring, work-shadowing and peer observations, with extra time allowed for preparation and marking. Specific and very effective staff training for teaching pupils aged 14–16 was arranged successfully in several colleges.

36. Management of physical resources, including estates of sometimes up to 750 hectares and a wide range of commercial operations, was often good and, in several cases, extremely good. The quality and breadth of resources varied a little throughout the good or better provision. In all instances, a realistic working environment was provided for subject areas, but did not always include a linked commercial operation. A key feature of very effective practice was how commercial aspects had an extremely positive impact on students' learning. This was a result of effective strategic and financial planning and management, and clear direction by senior managers. The roles and responsibilities of commercial and academic staff were clearly defined and given equal status. Effective communication between these two groups was given high priority and ensured that opportunities for learning were maximised.

The effective management and use of physical resources

The physical resources at one college included a farm, a garden centre, a veterinary practice and an equestrian centre. These operated as modern, commercially viable business enterprises, but they were also managed effectively to promote the integration of learning opportunities. Clearly defined roles and responsibilities were in place for commercial and academic staff, and communication and cooperation were very effective.

37. Nearly all colleges, through careful deployment of physical and human resources, had managed to keep practical groups to a size which ensured a high level of attention to developing the practical skill of each student.
38. Curriculum management had improved in many of the colleges. It was very well developed in a few where curriculum managers had a high level of ownership for the performance of students in their areas, including accountability for quality assurance and achieving challenging targets.
39. Self-assessment was also well developed in these colleges with good use made of contributions from a wide range of stakeholders. However, evaluation of good practice was rarely undertaken effectively. In particular, in evaluating teaching and learning, too great an emphasis was often placed on the grade profile produced by lesson observations, rather than identifying aspects of practice that had proved effective and innovative.
40. All the colleges visited had strengthened their links with the land-based industry. A number of Centres of Vocational Excellence were well established, often with themes that were very relevant to the modern land-based sector and in strong collaboration with industry. Links were strengthened further through effective work experience and the use of part-time tutors who are active practitioners. Colleges had worked hard to keep pace with industry developments and often provided a lead, for example in food technology. In addition, colleges played an active part in hosting regular events for the land-based industry, including conferences and dissemination events, farm

demonstrations, business clubs, riding events and industry consultation days. Collaboration of this kind has enabled some colleges to attract commercial funding for research and to develop teaching and learning materials with other specialist colleges and commercial partners.

Examples of effective collaborative links

In one college, a long-standing collaboration with a zoo had resulted in very good opportunities for students to experience the reality of this type of work. A jointly funded development officer spent considerable time in schools promoting careers involving work with animals.

Several of the colleges visited had partnerships with veterinary practices which worked very well to provide many opportunities to get involved with a realistic work setting and offered a wide range of experiences.

41. Links with schools were well developed, productive and very strong in nearly all colleges. The number of pupils studying land-based courses had grown considerably. Colleges also continued to have strong links with special schools and provision for vulnerable and excluded pupils.

Examples of strong and productive links with schools

One college, working in partnership with a southern regional water company, had developed 'Waterwise' gardens in five secondary schools. These were designed by college students but managed in collaboration with pupils from each school to promote awareness of environmental issues and also to encourage interest in horticulture and environmental courses.

Another college had set up, through innovative partnership work in a large rural county, an animal centre at a secondary school. Through careful planning of timetables and the curriculum this resource was proving successful in ensuring that an increasing number of pupils had access to an animal management vocational programme. Recruitment had increased year on year to this course.

42. The colleges visited recognised the need to widen participation onto land-based courses and nearly all had made considerable efforts to do so. In most cases this had not resulted in a notable increase in the number of students from under-represented groups. In the better examples, often where the profile of the college's catchment area supported the work, successful initiatives were introduced. These included taster days, links with community associations and centres, and the development of dedicated courses for non-traditional participants in horticulture linked to English for speakers of other languages

(ESOL) courses. This had attracted a much higher proportion of learners from black and minority ethnic groups into land-based learning.

Examples of effective actions to widen participation

In one inner city college, a project, 'Greenhearts', had successfully increased the number of students from black and minority ethnic heritage involved with the maintenance of green and open spaces in an urban environment. The project was aimed at women from under-represented groups and included language support as well as childcare and counselling.

In another college, particularly good work had been undertaken with the probation service and in the provision of courses for students with mental health problems. Dedicated courses were provided which were linked to specialist agencies and achieved good uptake and successful outcomes for students.

One inner-city college ran several open days themed around festivals related to different aspects of land-based work such as a 'Harvest Festival' and a 'Festival of Leather'. These events attracted a wide range of people from different backgrounds, both urban and rural, and proved very effective in promoting the land-based sector to under-represented groups.

Views of students

43. Students valued the strong focus on the development of practical skills in preparation for employment and appreciated the close links that were made between theory and practice in lessons.
44. In all the provision visited, students gave a very positive endorsement of the quality of practical resources and the ways in which these were used as a learning environment, as well as providing an essential realistic working setting. They gave many examples of their own contributions to commercial activities and maintaining the land-based estates within colleges and of the care they gave to the very wide range of livestock kept in each college. The livestock ranged from small animals to exotic species, and included horses, large herds of cows and flocks of sheep.
45. Students valued the high level of support, both pastoral and, increasingly, of an academic nature, given to them. They spoke of highly committed teachers and an 'open door' policy towards the support and help they regularly received.

Notes

The survey was conducted between July 2006 and March 2007. A sample of 22 colleges was selected, with one college involved in a pilot visit during summer 2006. All the colleges had been graded as good or outstanding in a land-based subject area at a recent inspection.

The visits were conducted by one HMI, three inspectors from the Adult Learning Inspectorate and one Additional Inspector. The majority of time during visits was spent evaluating examples of good practice suggested by each college that had sustained or improved provision in land-based subjects. Evidence evaluated included lesson observations and scrutiny of documents, including self-assessment reports, analyses of performance data, a review of learning resources and meetings with managers, tutors and students.

Useful websites

Green Gown awards are administered by the Higher Education Environmental Performance Improvement project (HEEPI): <http://www.heepi.org.uk>

The DCSF Standards Unit has produced learning resources produced for land-based subjects: <http://teachingandlearning.qia.org.uk/default.aspx#land>

Further information on qualifications in land-based subjects can be found on the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) website:

- Diploma
 - levels 1–3: www.qca.org.uk/qca_11375.aspx
 - foundation: www.qca.org.uk/qca_15010.aspx
 - higher: www.qca.org.uk/qca_15019.aspx
 - advanced: www.qca.org.uk/qca_15020.aspx

The Quality Improvement Agency's website has useful information on innovation and excellence in the post-16 learning and skills sector: www.qia.org.uk

The Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) excellence gateway is for post-16 learning and skills providers. It is the new home for Excalibur, now called the Good Practice Database. Here you will find examples of good practice identified through inspection, together with guides to aid self-improvement, suppliers of improvement services plus materials to support teaching and learning including land-based subjects:

- <http://excellence.qia.org.uk>
- Excalibur Good Practice Database:
<http://excellence.qia.org.uk/goodpracticedatabase>

Landex is an association of further and higher education colleges with specialist provision in land-based and related subjects: www.landex.org.uk/

The British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta) provides useful e-learning resources and links to alternative sites to access further digital and interactive technology materials for use by tutors: www.becta.org.uk/

Colleges participating in the survey

Specialist land-based colleges

Askham Bryan College
Bishop Burton College
Capel Manor Horticultural & Environmental Centre
Hadlow College
Hartpury College
Kingston Maurward College
Moulton College
Plumpton College
Sparsholt College

General further education colleges

Chichester College of Arts, Science & Technology
College of West Anglia, King's Lynn
Cornwall College, Redruth
Derby College
Guildford College of Further & Higher Education
Hugh Baird College, Bootle
Huntingdonshire Regional College, Huntingdon
ShIPLEY College
Solihull College
Warwickshire College, Royal Leamington Spa
Wiltshire College, Chippenham

Higher education institutions

Nottingham Trent University
Writtle Agricultural College, Chelmsford