

Centres of Vocational Excellence: Heralding a New Era for Further Education

Response from the Learning and Skills Development Agency

1. The Learning and Skills Development Agency wholeheartedly welcomes the Government's proposals to promote high level, specialist vocational provision in the Further Education (FE) sector. This acknowledgement of the important role of the FE colleges and their partners in developing the skills needed for the economy is timely. The initiative also establishes clearly that a key priority for the Learning and Skills Council is to focus on vocational skills to meet the needs of the economy. This challenging initiative should underpin the development of a confident, modern and responsive sector.
2. In addition to the specific questions raised in the consultation, we would raise the following issues.
3. There has been considerable debate within the FE sector around the title of the initiative, and some have argued that identifying some colleges or parts of colleges as Centres of Vocational Excellence downgrades those not so designated. This is clearly not the intention of the initiative, which is primarily aimed at developing more and better specialist vocational provision at level 3 and above. This in no way excludes other college provision from being viewed as excellent, it is simply that in the case of this initiative it is vocational specialisation that is being recognised.
4. Defining excellence in this context is complex. There are few benchmarks and a wide range of views on what constitutes excellence in specialist provision. Further Education Funding Council inspection reports provide quality ratings for curriculum programme areas, and the Training Standards Council similarly graded occupational areas. However, these categories, now discontinued, are too broad for this purpose. We recommend, therefore, that the inspectorates develop new and specific criteria when judging quality in specialist vocational education and training.
5. Judgements about quality in previous inspection processes were based on criteria which emphasised effective learning, but took less account of employer involvement, relevance to the world of work and effective employee updating. We would suggest that high quality vocationally specific provision should support the economy, employers and employment. Criteria for Centres of Vocational Excellence should reflect these aims. Relevant content in learning provision is crucially important, as is effective and flexible provision. As such, criteria for Centres of Vocational Excellence need to be firmly related to doing the right things, as well as doing things right.

6. Our discussions with the FE colleges have revealed considerable disquiet about the possible exclusion of disadvantaged and non-traditional learners from the Centres of Vocational Excellence initiative. The fear that excellence may be equated solely with high level learning programmes or qualifications has been expressed. While we recognise their fears, there is an urgent need to develop high level specialist Vocational Education and Training (VET) to secure the skills required for a thriving economy. The importance of a concerted effort to develop high level skills cannot be over emphasised as this area has been neglected in the recent past. The success of the Centres of Vocational Excellence initiative is also crucially dependent on the engagement of people with high levels of attainment pre-16 and professionals seeking updating in the workplace.
7. The Centres of Vocational Excellence initiative should, however, be inclusive and build on the great strides made by colleges in widening participation. The Centres of Vocational Excellence initiative should provide opportunities for new learners to gain high level skills and knowledge, and therefore access to better jobs and life chances. These latter two outcomes are key to the objectives of economic prosperity and social cohesion, envisaged by the Government.

Question 1

Are there additional operational objectives that Centres of Vocational excellence should seek to address?

8. We support the operational objectives given for Centres of Vocational Excellence.
9. A further operational objective might be that Centres of Vocational Excellence should take a leadership role in the development of the vocational curriculum in the specialist areas. The establishment of developmental networks of teachers working in the same discipline across 14-16, further, higher and work-based education and training would bring real benefit. Such networks could ensure that the curriculum is informed about leading-edge developments within related occupational areas and secure more effective transition from the various phases of learning. Centres of Vocational Excellence could therefore be instrumental in improving both the appropriateness of the content and the quality of vocational education and training.
10. In addition we suggest that the following points should be considered:

Number and distribution of Centres

11. While we support the objective to ensure that half of all general further education colleges in England should have at least one Centre of Vocational Excellence by 2004-05, achieving this will require careful analysis of the current position and significant development activity.
12. Robust information on the current capacity of colleges is needed to properly determine the appropriate numbers, location and type of specialist centre to be developed. Local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) should undertake an audit of existing examples of specialist vocational excellence in their area of operation and assess the match of provision with priorities for skills development within

their local economy. A similar audit may also be required on a regional, national and sector basis.

13. Our research has revealed the piecemeal development of existing centres of excellence and specialist provision in colleges across the country. Some centres of excellence have been established as a result of previous initiatives, notably the Competitiveness and Collaboration Funds. Some are in place because of the enthusiasm of a senior manager or local agency, or because of historical allocation of resources. While this may be advantageous in providing a base for the establishment of new Centres of Vocational Excellence, employers and the general public may be confused at the lack of standardisation in what constitutes a centre of excellence. Re-designating existing centres of excellence and bringing them in line with criteria for the Centres of Vocational Excellence initiative will be time-consuming and may still distort the overall distribution and type of specialist provision. An alternative approach may be to consider a new title for Centres of Vocational Excellence, such as Specialist Vocational Academies, with some existing centres of excellence being re-designated, if appropriate, within a given timescale.

Developing innovative approaches to meeting skills needs

14. The Agency agrees that new approaches are required to secure effective delivery of learning which meet the demands of the economy. We would suggest that more explicit links be forged between the activities of *learnirect* and the Centres of Vocational Excellence. Research and demonstration projects, which test innovative approaches to identifying training needs and delivering learning to the employed or remote learner, would be extremely useful. These projects should also explore the staff and organisational development needs associated with innovative approaches to meeting skills needs.

Question 2

Are there other ways in which Centres of Vocational Excellence might seek to meet employers' current and future skills needs?

Skills Needs: now and in the future

15. Direct relationships between Centres of Vocational Excellence and local and sector employers will be central to their success in meeting employers' current and future skills needs. This needs to be balanced with the brokerage and strategic planning role of LSCs and other intermediaries. This will need to be carefully managed in order to secure coherence locally and nationally in the pattern of Centres of Vocational Excellence provision, but also to support responsiveness and innovation in FE/employer partnerships. Ongoing planning is required to decide where training takes place, what form it takes and who should deliver it across the full range of training needs identified for each sector. A regional and national overview of the pattern of Centres of Vocational Excellence development and its impact on the skills of the workforce should be maintained to avoid duplication of effort and to ensure that gaps in provision are plugged.

16. There are also a number of important issues that need to be resolved relating to VET and qualifications which impact on the capacity of providers to meet individual and employers' skills needs:

Range of learning programmes

17. The experience of Centres of Excellence may signal the need to review the range of vocational qualifications on offer. The development of GNVQs and now Vocational A-levels has shifted the emphasis in college provision from courses and qualifications to develop occupationally specific and vocational skills and knowledge to more general, pre-vocational learning. There are few options for young people wishing to study full-time for vocational qualifications. Work-based alternatives may also be limited because opportunities to become Modern Apprentices depend on the local employment base. As a result, colleges have responded to demand by offering programmes leading to NVQs to people not in employment or have reverted to vocational qualifications outside the NVQ and GNVQ frameworks.
18. There are equally difficulties with Modern Apprenticeship frameworks, which may include non-NVQ qualifications but are delivered without the dedicated time and expertise to develop underpinning knowledge and theory. The Centres of Vocational Excellence initiative has re-emphasised the crucial importance of vocational education offered by the FE colleges and the range of vocational learning programmes available.

Responsive Qualifications

19. In order to meet the fast changing needs of employers, specifications for qualifications should facilitate content which is highly flexible and can be customised to meet employers' particular needs. Currently the process for changing or revising qualifications takes a considerable time. Faster cycles are needed for updating qualifications while still ensuring their validity and integrity. To meet the needs of employers and employees in SMEs, a unitised approach which allows mix and match within an overarching framework is required. This may encourage more employers to become involved in training and in offering support to Centres of Vocational Excellence.
20. The qualifications system can also be slow to respond to newly emerging industries or to new "clusters" of more established industries. A more flexible and responsive system is needed to support inward investment and skill development within regions; in particular in regions where new employment opportunities are needed to replace declining industries or businesses. The Centres of Vocational Excellence initiative could again take the lead in working towards a vocational qualifications system that is responsive to employer needs.

Initial Training versus Training for Change

21. Colleges, employers, QCA and others need to consider the balance between education and training for initial entry to the workforce or for progression to higher vocational training and updating or re-skilling to cope with changing demands. There will be differences determined by these different markets, e.g. the new entrant and the established employee. It is important to be able to train for stock as well as to update skills for new and emerging industries.

22. A Centre of Vocational Excellence must be able to provide retraining and updating courses for existing employees alongside provision preparing young people and adults to enter the labour market. This in turn will require regular staff development and updating, preferably in partnership with employers. The use of ICT in training will be an essential tool in the development of Centres of Vocational Excellence.

Question 3

How will a Centre of Vocational Excellence attract, retain, develop and reward high quality specialist staff and how will they demonstrate their ability to do so?

23. The success of the Centres of Vocational Excellence initiative is crucially dependent on the contribution of staff who are up to date with practice in their specific vocational sectors. The need to attract potential teachers from industry is also important. Part time staff still working in their particular vocational area can offer a great deal to colleges, but there are barriers to their recruitment, notably that current initiatives emphasise the need for qualified FE teacher status for part timers.

Incentives and Rewards

24. A range of incentives and rewards are needed to attract staff from industry, these may include:

- Financial rewards that are comparable to remuneration in their vocational sector
- A range of resources to support their initial teaching experience
- Involvement in the planning and updating of the vocational content of courses
- The opportunity to pair more experienced teachers with new recruits from industry to allow cross fertilisation of experience and expertise.

25. Financial incentives, such as market supplements in hard-to-recruit areas, may be needed to recruit people with recent and relevant industrial or sector expertise. However strategies to recruit, retain and reward all Centres of Vocational Excellence staff should be considered. Working in a Centre of Vocational Excellence may of itself be an incentive to some, and may bring better promotion prospects in the future.

26. Shared staffing with employers or the endorsement of industry, perhaps through designated 'Teaching Fellows' – whose salary is supported or supplemented by an industrial sponsor - may also be attractive. Employer partners could offer their staff the opportunity to work part-time in FE. Employers could explore how participation in VET by their employees could be recognised within personal development plans or contribute to business objectives. Secondment to education by experienced vocational sector staff could also be of mutual benefit to colleges and employers, and large and small enterprises could offer industrial placements for teachers.

27. New methods of working allowing some flexibility in working conditions are needed, including:

- Industrial updating through placement and co-operative working arrangements with large and small enterprises
- The opportunity to offer consultancy services to industry
- A role in the updating of current vocational staff
- Timetables which include dedicated time to undertake regular research and development with up-to-date teaching schemes, activities and materials.

Updating existing staff

28. There are currently a substantial number of skilled and experienced teachers working in potential Centres of Vocational Excellence centres. Many would welcome the opportunity to complement established teaching skills with up-to-date sector-specific experience. Colleges should audit the skills and aspirations of current staff and identify people who would benefit from:

- Industrial placements which generate identifiable learning outcomes and benefits to the sponsoring company
- Enhanced staff and career development opportunities
- Increased flexibility of timetables and workloads.

29. Many current teachers and lecturers are working with companies within their vocational sector. This experience should be explicitly drawn upon in Centres of Vocational Excellence. The needs of sector employers and current industrial developments should feature strongly in strategic planning, governance, staff development and training opportunities.

Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

30. ICT could be exploited as a training and updating medium to provide open and distance learning for staff working in Centres of Vocational Excellence. It could provide a vehicle for sharing teaching and sector specific expertise to geographical areas remote from expert teachers or delivery centres. A mix of virtual and face-to-face training opportunities could enable leading practitioners to take an active role in the transformation process to change practice across the sector. Updating staff skills in the use of ICT for teaching and learning and improving professional efficiency should feature highly in all Centres of Vocational Excellence development activities.

Marketing

31. Strong local and national marketing campaigns will be needed to promote the activities of Centres of Vocational Excellence and to develop them as a recognised and valued brand. This could have a knock-on effect on recruitment. In addition recruitment practices may need to be strengthened to reach potential teachers such as women returners and those approaching retirement with sector specific experience. Focussed training provision could be developed in association with Higher Education and Further Education to update and prepare staff for teaching in Centres of Vocational Excellence.

Practitioner networks

32. The development of high quality, up-to-date and motivated Centres of Vocational Excellence practitioners will depend on robust support and networking opportunities. Vocational, sector-specific groupings of Centres of Vocational Excellence providers and related NTOs should be developed. These could support the activities and development of teachers through websites, publications and regular meetings.

Question 4

What factors should determine the location and type of specialism of Centres of Vocational Excellence?

Meeting skills needs

33. The establishment of the Centres of Vocational Excellence network should be informed by priorities for skills development drawn from intelligence gathered by National Training Organisations, Regional Development Agencies, the Small Business Service, the Department of Trade and Industry and others. The importance of dialogue with employers to define skills needs, in ways which can be readily translated into education and training programmes and qualifications, cannot be overemphasised. Research into priorities for skills development should take account of the differing needs of large, medium and small companies. Across the network of Centres of Vocational Excellence there will also need to be agreement on the extent to which each centre will meet regional, local and national needs.

34. A national strategy for skills development will need to encompass: sector workforce development plans, new types of specialisms, geographic and urban or rural distribution, low-volume niche training and national resources to support key strategic industries.

35. There should be support for the Centre of Vocational Excellence from the local LSC, to secure relevance to local needs. LSCs locally will need to consider the balance of specialist, high level provision across their area, and the likely level of demand for this.

36. Centres of Vocational Excellence should also complement other strategies and development programmes for skills development in the region and local area, such as European funded programmes, Single Regeneration Budget, and Skills Development Fund. Similarly, the relationship between Centres of Vocational Excellence and other initiatives, such as the New Technology Institutes, should be made explicit and their respective contributions to the development of the skills base should be defined. Opportunities for cross-fertilisation of ideas and joint staff development should be explored.

Accessibility - the importance of 'place' and use of ICT

37. We recommend that consideration should be given to using ICT to make specialist Centre of Vocational Excellence provision accessible to people who may otherwise be excluded because of geography or competing work or home commitments. The LSC will need to consider how to ensure that all learners with

the aspiration and entry qualifications to take part in specialist provision have the opportunity to do so.

38. We would suggest that a model of main centres with satellites and local centres linked on-line may act to mitigate problems of access. Such arrangements may be essential to ensure effective and equitable access to a range of skills for people in remote and rural locations.
39. An accompanying arrangement of satellite organisations, centres or employers could help to enable colleges and other providers outside of the Centres of Vocational Excellence networks to benefit from their expertise and resources. We believe that serious attention should be given to enabling a wider range of providers to connect with the Centres of Vocational Excellence network. To enhance accessibility, Centres of Vocational Excellence and satellite centres could develop modular provision, with underpinning knowledge being provided through mixed or multiple media learning materials, and block release learning periods and possibly residential courses arranged elsewhere. Linking both Centres of Vocational Excellence and other centres/employers through ICT, with formal agreements regarding the scheduling of block release/residential learning opportunities, could help to overcome issues of critical mass and geographical location.
40. This model would be particularly suitable for specialisms that require the use of industrial standard equipment or working environments which may be too expensive for a single centre to sustain. It could also lead to the effective utilisation of costly resources, direct links with employers and partnership agreements between providers.
41. Consideration should also be given to the 'Industrial Estate' model where individual SMEs who are unable to provide opportunities to develop all the competencies within an NVQ form partnerships with similar SMEs located nearby to share the training of their Modern Apprentices. Centres of Vocational Excellence could support such partnerships and consideration should be given to the need for Centres with this primary aim.

Question 5

What criteria should be used to identify and establish Centres of Vocational Excellence?

42. Certain general principles should inform the development of criteria to identify and establish Centres of Vocational Excellence. The criteria should be:
 - evidence-based with subjective judgements of quality kept to a minimum or capable of robust justification
 - transparent and easy to apply – this helps those assessing the colleges' eligibility, and should also help the colleges in framing their plans to become Centres of Vocational Excellence.
43. The criteria for selecting the Pathfinder Colleges provided a useful starting point, but presented difficulties in identifying vocational specialisms within broad

programme areas, which encompass many subject areas within a single title. These need to be resolved for the full rollout.

44. A different approach may be to consider the development of criteria which clearly relate to:

- the economy
- employers
- employment

on a local and national basis.

45. Criteria relating to track record and current evidence of the quality of resources and staffing will, of course, be important. However, if there is evidence of need for new specialisms or clusters of skills, factors such as employer commitment, college/employer partnerships and the needs of the local skills base may be pre-eminent. Demand-side criteria must have as much weight as supply-side criteria in the selection process. This will require considerable dialogue with local and national employers and NTOs to determine needs for both pre-entry and training for Continuing Professional Development.

46. It will be important for Centres of Vocational Excellence to have a direct link to leading experts or organisations in their field. A Centre or network of Centres, in Performing Arts should be linked to leading practitioners or companies in the business. A Centre of Vocational Excellence in automotive engineering should have strong links with car manufacturers. In all cases, links with Higher Education Institutions that provide higher level courses in the same specialism should be developed. By so doing, the credibility of the Centre of Vocational Excellence will be enhanced and maintained.

47. To maintain the credibility of the initiative, it will be important both to adhere to the criteria and to review the relevance of the criteria in the light of experience and changing needs. Communication lines to colleges regarding any changes should be clear and open. Moderation of the interpretation of the criteria across local LSCs will also be important.

Performance monitoring

48. It will also be necessary to monitor on-going performance to determine whether Centre of Vocational Excellence status should be continued. Inspectorates, reporting against specific criteria (see paragraph 5) and LSC reviews would be essential elements of a monitoring process.

49. Ongoing monitoring of performance might take into account progression, especially into employment. "Distance travelled" by learners should be a key success indicator. Job outcomes should relate to progression into jobs which are relevant to the sector(s) covered by the Centre of Vocational Excellence, or should demonstrate progression into jobs at a higher level than may otherwise have been expected.

50. Potential Centres of Vocational Excellence also should indicate short and long term objectives. Monitoring should identify an emphasis on sustaining vocational excellence in the longer term.

Question 6.

Are the support mechanisms we propose establishing sufficient/appropriate? Could the Learning and Skills Council, the Learning and Skills Development Agency or the Further Education National Training Organisation do more to support Centres of Vocational excellence

51. We welcome the opportunity to support the Pathfinder Colleges in the transfer of good practice. We particularly welcome the emphasis on transfer as opposed to dissemination of good practice, which recognises the difference between the two processes.

52. Our research into the extent to which colleges have the capacity to meet the challenge of the Centres of Vocational Excellence initiative leads us to believe that the scale of the development needed to support the Centres of Vocational Excellence initiative is considerable. We welcome the emphasis on providing support through the Pathfinders, but note that the skills required to successfully transform practice are different from those required to manage and deliver an effective Centre of Vocational Excellence. Staff in particular colleges will require specific skills and may require significant support, and the process overall will need co-ordination.

53. We have significant experience in managing the change process. Approaches that work include:

- The identification of general principals of good practice, with case study examples, and methods of transfer from the given specific examples to the participants' own situations
- Networks which facilitate exchange of ideas between people with common interests, are developmental as well as descriptive, have defined themes and agendas for their meetings, involve sharing materials and pooling ideas for development
- Development Projects, which are issue- or problem-based, collaborative and centrally co-ordinated
- Shadowing and 'buddying' arrangements and peer perusal of practice, which involves practitioners from different organisations analysing and commenting on their respective practice

54. However, it should not be assumed that the colleges will be able to meet all developments from their own staff resources. External support will undoubtedly be required to develop subject specific knowledge and skills. This may involve specialist courses, research projects, shadowing and exchanges with industry.

55. We agree that there is a need to support staff in developing both teaching and subject specialist skills. The Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO) can make a significant contribution to the articulation of these skills, and ensure their inclusion in the framework of standards. This would ensure that the skills and knowledge needed to teach in Centres of Vocational Excellence was given priority, particularly in initial teacher training.
56. However, there is a distinction to be made between developing standards and providing staff training. This latter is a substantial undertaking, requiring collaboration between interested bodies. The extent of updating needed by FE staff was explored in an LSDA research project, *Developing leading edge staff in VET*. This revealed the considerable extent of development required to bring staff up to date with current practice in industry. The scale of the task demands a coherent and strategic approach, drawing on the expertise of all the interested parties.
57. The LSC's quality assurance function will clearly also have a role in identifying good practice and priorities for development, as will Ofsted and ALI Inspections. LSDA will need to draw on such evidence in designing support and ongoing staff development
58. The task facing all those charged with supporting the implementation of the Centres of Vocational Excellence initiative is substantial. Therefore co-ordination of effort and complementarity between support for institutional, curriculum and staff development is essential.