

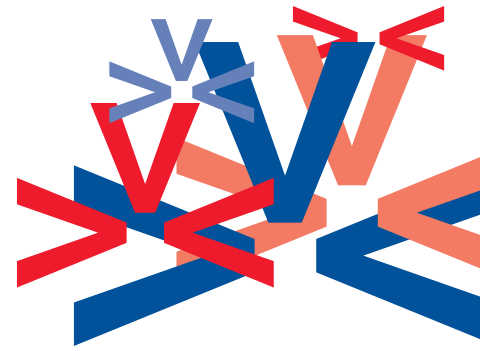
Centres of Vocational Excellence in Further Education

Phase One Progress Report:

FE pathfinders

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Preface

‘We must achieve a radical transformation in colleges’ capacity to provide the skills we need to prosper in the new economy. Just as specialisms have driven up standards in schools, so in further education, specialisation will sharpen the colleges’ focus on meeting the skills needs of business.

‘By 2004/05, half of all colleges should be centres of excellence for a particular vocational subject, building on the real progress that has been made by specialist schools. This will be backed with £100 million of funding over the next three years to help transform colleges into local, regional or national centres of excellence, and we will be looking for businesses to support these centres, both with cash and with direct support and involvement from specific sectors.’

Colleges for Excellence and Innovation Secretary of State for Education and Employment, November 2000.

Introduction

1

This report is part of the LSC's evaluation of Phase One of the Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) programme. It will inform the roll-out of the main programme and the longer-term approach to assessing its effectiveness. It is also intended to help providers strengthen their vocational provision and, where relevant, assist them in developing proposals to join the CoVE programme.

2

In November 2000, the Secretary of State for Education outlined the government's vision of a modern further education sector. That vision established the role that colleges will play in meeting the social and economic challenges set by a radical transformation of the sector. The demand for high-quality programmes that realise learners' potential, the broadening of the skills base, increased access to learning and improvements in employability are all key features of this transformation.

3

The CoVE programme is one component of the LSC's overall strategy to meet the skills needs of employers locally, regionally, nationally and sectorally. It also seeks to give more people from all backgrounds access to the high-quality vocational training that they need to succeed in a modern economy, and to spread good practice to the FE sector and beyond.

4

Sixteen CoVE pathfinders were established in July 2001 to set the standard for aspiring CoVEs and to help develop the criteria used to measure their achievements. Pathfinders are responsible for sharing good practice and helping the LSC's CoVE programme development work with organisations.

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Further information on the establishment of the CoVE programme can be found in the references given in the Annex to this report.

Research aims and methods

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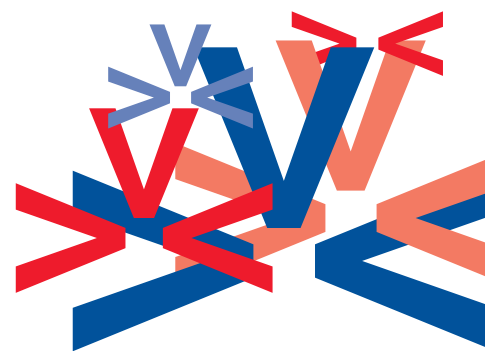
In November 2001, the LSC commissioned CRG to undertake a research and evaluation project of the CoVE pathfinders in FE colleges in England that are involved in Phase One of the CoVE programme. The aims of the research were to collect information on:

- the process used to select, assess and support pathfinders;
- pathfinders' support for providers seeking to develop a CoVE proposal;
- the effect pathfinders have had in colleges in spreading good practice and improving vocational provision;
- the views of CoVE learners, employers and other local stakeholders on the pathfinder experience;
- the views of national stakeholders, including DfES, National Training Organisations (NTOs) and the LSC on the impact of pathfinders; and
- areas for development, including a proposed framework and methodology for longer-term evaluation of the CoVE programme.

7

The methodology combined desk research with fieldwork conducted in February 2002. Face-to-face and telephone interviews and national and regional focus groups collected views from representatives of:

- pathfinder providers;
- the Connexions service;
- Regional Development Agencies;
- local education authorities;
- commercial providers;
- employers;
- local learning partnerships;
- FE colleges;
- schools;
- community and voluntary organisations;
- group training associations; and
- learners.



Key Success Factors

8

The interviews gathered views on:

- working arrangements and communications;
- staff recruitment and retention;
- staff skills and experience and staff development programmes;
- the supply and demand analysis undertaken by CoVE pathfinders;
- the impact of CoVE on institutions and the implications for staff and staffing;
- partnership working;
- training arrangements, including modes of provision and the learning environment and facilities;
- mechanisms for learner support and progression;
- the experiences and expectations of learners;
- approaches to spreading and seeking examples of good practice;
- CoVE support needs; and
- assessment and inspection, including self-assessment.

9

The research has identified the following factors as being of key importance in delivering vocational excellence:

- a clear strategic vision for the college and each area of learning;
- robust quality assurance systems throughout the organisation;
- the ability to raise and manage independent funding;
- an open system of resource allocation in the college overall;
- staff involvement in change at grass roots level;
- a culture of partnership working with employers;
- the strong commitment of teaching staff;
- a staff development ethos and the capacity to provide continuous professional development;
- innovative and distinctive learning units; and
- comprehensive information systems.

Findings

Management

10

The process of choosing pathfinder CoVEs included an assessment of the standards of management and leadership demonstrated by each potential CoVE and its college more generally. Colleges without strong management and enlightened, imaginative leadership are unlikely to have been successful. Equally, it is unlikely that the selection as a pathfinder CoVE will have made much difference to the way a college was managed. As one pathfinder college principal put it, 'we were doing it right anyway.'

11

Management of the set-up of the CoVE and implementation of the development plan were handled in various but equally successful ways. All pathfinders had appointed a CoVE manager to oversee the process and take responsibility for making sure everything was going as planned. Frequent team meetings to discuss progress and agree actions and individual responsibilities were often a feature of the set-up process.

12

Some of the relatively new principals described how they had found it necessary to effect cultural change within their organisations. A spirit of internal competition had in some cases hampered development, and measures were introduced to reduce 'site mentality' and to unite different college departments behind a common purpose. Other actions to encourage this included bringing staff closer to decision-making processes so that they had a better appreciation of the overall college objectives.

13

Many pathfinders found it necessary to recruit extra staff to manage the increased workload associated with having become a CoVE. This ranged from taking on full- or part-time lecturing staff to provide cover for staff engaged in good practice dissemination, to employing additional administrative staff. Some pathfinders were able to reorganise the roles and responsibilities of existing members of staff to tackle the workload.

14

However, many pathfinders reported that recruitment was not without its problems. Trained staff in some specialised areas can earn significantly more in industry than in the teaching sector, and some pathfinders lost staff to neighbouring colleges:

It's a real problem – I've had local colleges trying to headhunt my staff. When they offer that extra few thousand over what we can pay them they're obviously faced with a difficult decision, which ultimately means we're being penalised for being a CoVE. (Principal, pathfinder college)

15

However, this was balanced by evidence that job satisfaction and pride in the work done by the CoVE pathfinder are factors that influence staff morale and consequently turnover (see paragraphs 44–45 and 57–58).

Strategy

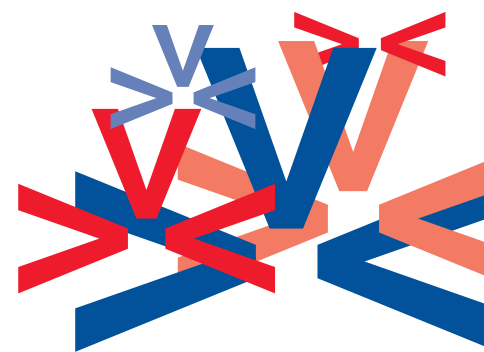
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All colleges produce a strategic plan. Pathfinders underpinned this with a clear strategic vision which staff understood and contributed to. Principals in particular stressed the need for an inclusive communications strategy that built on the current and potential abilities of all staff.

Strategic partners

17

The impact on Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) of having a pathfinder in their subregion varied. Some were already working closely with the pathfinder, usually as a result of a long-standing relationship. Some had funded initiatives in colleges or had match-funded European bids, processes that had brought them into contact with many of the providers that are now pathfinders. At the other end of the scale, other RDAs had barely progressed beyond recognising the existence of the CoVE pathfinder.



18

Even so, all the RDAs interviewed recognised the significance of the CoVE programme itself as part of strategic planning for training at local, regional and national levels. They felt some uncertainty about their role in the selection and support process, especially in relation to other partners such as local LSCs. To some extent, RDAs were feeling their way towards their precise level of involvement. Some noted that they had been more closely engaged with the first round of CoVE proposals than subsequently with pathfinder selection.

19

At the same time, pathfinders themselves did not feel that they were getting a particularly strong steer from RDAs. In many cases, they viewed RDAs as bodies still in the process of becoming established. Another issue was that much of the labour market information provided by RDAs and local LSCs is of necessity retrospective, although pathfinders did see the recent RDA strategic plans as giving a good overall direction.

20

The impact of National Training Organisations (NTOs) and Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) on the selection of pathfinders seems to have been more substantial. As national organisations with a regional framework, they hold a wealth of data on their sector and have been closely involved in the development of qualification frameworks and targets. Some pathfinders had expected the local LSCs or RDAs to broker relationships between the colleges and employers but there was some evidence to suggest that, from a college perspective, NTOs and SSCs are better placed to do this. NTOs and SSCs did not have a high profile in all pathfinders, but where they did, they were very influential in developing the CoVE and feeding in employers' views, occasionally providing very good leads to them.

21

Colleges are involved in a number of joint initiatives with Trade Unions such as the Union Learning Fund and Ufi Learndirect. At this stage, these tend to be college-wide rather than specific to the pathfinder CoVE, and as a result only one Trade Union official was interviewed for the research.

Promotion and dissemination

22

Pathfinder colleges raised the profile of their CoVE status using launch events or similar promotional activities, such as presentations at sector conferences. Press work was also effective in announcing CoVE developments at local level.

23

Many pathfinders were engaged in spreading good practice before they were selected as a CoVE. This might be through the Standards Fund dissemination work, the Beacon College scheme, or simply through productive links with other colleges and industrial bodies.

24

Importantly, they had also learned from each other through events arranged to encourage further and future networking. Members of sectoral groups and alliances such as the Pathfinder Technology Group reported their development as authoritative bodies with an important positive impact on the quality and type of provision available. These groups also acted as a focal point for representation to other bodies such as NTOs, SSCs, employer organisations and professional associations.

25


All pathfinder colleges received requests for more information and visits from other colleges, in some cases in large numbers. Requests were handled on a case-by-case basis, with responses tailored to the needs of the enquirer.

26

Specific activities and events to share good practice in relation to the work of the CoVE were carefully planned and timetabled. Staff from other local colleges, governors, employers, parents and students were the main attendees to such events.

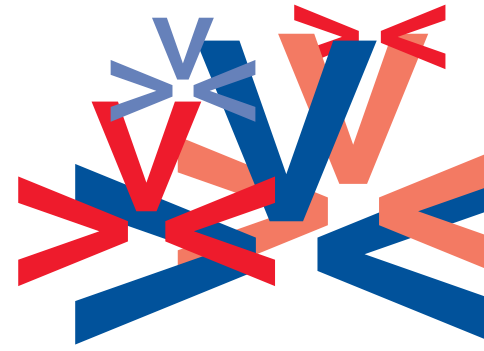
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No pathfinders reported using mentoring arrangements, although the improved communication between providers suggests that this type of activity has the potential to help bring about lasting improvements in the quality of provision.



We're not precious about
what we know, and we
know we're not perfect.
We can improve and we are
always happy to talk with
other colleges for the
benefit of everyone.

(Principal, pathfinder college)



28

A pattern emerged indicating that the threat of competition might discourage dissemination between pathfinder CoVEs and potential CoVEs. Interestingly, most pathfinders, while being aware of issues of competition, felt that this did not impinge on their desire or ability to share good practice. In fact, many recognised their own flaws and felt that dissemination was a two-way process from which they themselves could learn:

We're not precious about what we know, and we know we're not perfect. We can improve and we are always happy to talk with other colleges for the benefit of everyone.

(Principal, pathfinder college)

29

Some pathfinders felt they were expected to provide the 'magic formula' to developing a successful CoVE proposal, as if filling in a form in a certain way or implementing a certain procedure would guarantee success. This somewhat simplistic attitude was not prevalent but was nonetheless evident in some cases.

Quality assurance and information systems

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Pathfinders have robust quality assurance (QA) systems that focus on student performance. Under-achievement is actively investigated and action is taken to remedy the problems.

31

However, the QA systems are far from being monolithic structures that limit development. There was a recognised need for flexibility in systems that could encompass the different cultures within a single organisation. This was achieved in part through devolved QA systems that promote ownership by individual departments. This in turn encourages staff to take a positive and proactive view of QA arrangements. In interviews, staff saw the QA system as beneficial.

32

Sound financial and management information systems are key selection criteria when CoVE proposals are considered. Pathfinders mentioned in particular their 'soft' data systems that relate to students and staff. Examples include student progress reviews, programme reviews, and staff appraisal and development reviews. There were cases where employers, at least the larger ones, were involved in programme reviews or were represented on advisory boards.

33

Otherwise, information systems relating to employers tended to be less formalised. Much of the success of a less formal approach depends on good team working and trust among pathfinder staff, who in many cases felt empowered to find a lead and work with it.

34

In practice, this often meant that several members of staff would be dealing with a diverse group of employers. Sharing the information with colleagues was seen as very important, and although formal databases about contact existed, a great deal of information was exchanged informally.

35

Pathfinder staff at all levels recognised that representation from small- and medium-enterprises (SMEs) was lower than they would have liked. SMEs tend not to respond well to surveys, newsletters or other general marketing efforts: *You have to make time to go out and see them. To get them to come here you have to provide some benefits. Discussing the progress of a trainee is one benefit they will come in for and sometimes you can capture their attention with a new piece of equipment or a new development. But initially you have to see them where they work.*

(Tutor, printing pathfinder)

Resources

Financial

36 Pathfinders had adequate resources to fund the work they were doing for the CoVE. This almost always meant they had raised independent funds. There was a preference for resourcing through efficiency rather than through complicated grant applications that had 'strings attached', unless these met a very well-specified need.

37 In funding, success breeds success. Pathfinders enjoyed substantial benefits through their good relations with businesses, which frequently loaned, gave, tested or serviced equipment. In some cases, a 'virtuous circle' applied, and a gift from one manufacturer might prompt involvement with another.

38 Some of the money that was made available through the pathfinder CoVE had allowed the college to tackle long-standing wish-lists, often in highly cost-effective ways. Often a relatively small sum led to significant benefits for learners. Staff saw at least as many benefits stemming from smaller incremental changes as they did from large-scale capital investments.

39 A key feature noted in all the pathfinder colleges was that resources were there to be shared, a belief underpinned by the feeling that the college was a 'big team with a common purpose, not a series of competing teams'. This ethos had a positive effect on the willingness of budget-holders to defer benefits from income earned by their departments for the benefit of others. For instance, independent income from employer-based activities would go into the 'college pot' where it could be used to subsidise minority areas in general further education, improve access or provide other elements to enhance the college environment.

40

Senior management saw the need to communicate clearly and openly about these issues and almost all the staff interviewed understood, and felt they were a part of, the resource allocation process.

Learning facilities

41

Some pathfinders, although they are part of a larger general FE institution, occupy a dedicated purpose-built site. This was felt to help enormously with developing a learning unit which staff, students and employers could identify with. Even where the pathfinder did share space with other areas of the college's work, efforts were made to arrange learning areas in a way which would create a strong identity:

When I came here it almost felt as if the faculty/school structure was dictated by the layout of the buildings. We reorganised for a flatter structure with clearer departmental units. Over a period of time we've refurbished and re-housed along those lines.

(Principal, pathfinder college)

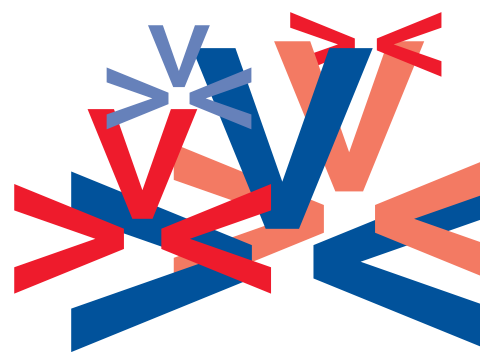
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The effect of this on learners was a much better sense of belonging – reflected, staff told us, in much better than average attendance rates. Although no specific comparison was made between pathfinder premises and the rest of the college's building stock, the researchers commented on the lack of graffiti and general cleanliness of pathfinder premises, even those in rundown inner city areas. Employers also liked the strong physical identity, and saw the CoVE brand as enhancing this:

*When I go to the college, I don't say to my colleagues that's where I'm going. I say I'm going to the School of Applied X – then they know **why** I'm going.* (Manager, chemical industry)

43

One pathfinder established a 'virtual' site where tutorials on background theory took place, as well as a number of other offerings for employers. Interestingly, this was underpinned by a purpose-built physical facility which was used frequently by both employers and work-based learners. In other words, the innovative virtual centre relied heavily on a physical presence.



Staff

Morale

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The CoVE pathfinder had major positive effects on the staff involved. The staff members involved were already providing an excellent service to their students and to employers, and were role models within their colleges. They saw the CoVE as a recognition of excellence as 'leaders in the field' and as a reward for years of hard work, continuous improvement and good standing within their individual area of expertise.

45

More specifically, staff reported the following benefits:

- boosted confidence;
- allowed them to think longer term and strategically;
- encouraged them to seek new ways of improving teaching and learning;
- encouraged them to develop innovative employer partnerships;
- made them more willing to investigate and invest in their own training and development needs;
- allowed them to take risks;
- gave them confidence in approaching employers;
- allowed them a greater say in resource allocation;
- helped them reduce the timescale for implementing changes or upgrading facilities; and
- offered a degree of 'clout' which helped them challenge curriculum and qualification design and raise the status of vocational training with sector bodies.

The pathfinder CoVE award (sic) was a clear signal that we're here to stay, that someone has recognised that we are doing a good job and could do even better. That makes you think a bit more strategically both as a department and individually. It also makes you want to have a go, to push yourself and challenge things. Because it's such high status we can challenge other things in the college that other staff can't. (Lecturer, pathfinder college)

46

Staff did however report some drawbacks to being a pathfinder – mainly that it made them very busy people! The motivational aspect of being a pathfinder seems to help them cope with this.

47

One area of concern was that their new responsibilities might draw them away from what made their units excellent in the first place – helping students to learn. Although resources were made available to provide teaching cover, a doubt existed that this may not reach the same high quality as that provided by the original staff members. Lecturing staff feared a decline in standards because of national teacher shortages and difficulties in recruitment.

Staff involvement

48

Staff involvement in planning was closely allied to strong morale. Again, pathfinder staff had been involved in developments for many years, and saw selection as a CoVE pathfinder in no small way as a result of this. Their involvement covered the whole range of activity from curriculum development to resource allocation. For the CoVE programme specifically, staff had helped identify areas for improvement, such as:

- planning appropriate layouts for new facilities;
- developing quality assurance systems; and
- negotiating with suppliers for new equipment.

49

Staff felt they were equipped to deal with these matters because they had a sound knowledge of the needs of students and employers, and felt trusted and empowered (if a little overworked) by their colleges. For staff in the pathfinders, development and change are a way of life, not something to be resisted.

Staff development

50

In a similar way, staff development was not a new concept to CoVE pathfinders, and almost all had a long history of developing their own staff and of being an important part of the development of other staff at their institutions. It has clearly been a priority in pathfinder CoVEs for some time and systems are in place to make training resources available, whether this is to pay directly for development programmes or to allow cover for staff absence due to training.

51

The pathfinder programme has generally increased the ability of staff to undertake continuous professional development (CPD). Examples of the latter include specialised training programmes, attendance at conferences, and spending time in industry.

52

Good relations with industry and employers brought direct benefits for staff development at one pathfinder:
*We know our employers at least as well as our students [...]
 When we visit we make time to talk. They will often show us new processes or machines which are really not part of what the lads are training on but it's interesting because it lets you know about trends and things we will need to train people in the future. If they have got something new we often get included in the training provided by the employer. This gives you a lot more credibility with students, especially on short courses for retraining and updating existing workers.*
 (Tutor, pathfinder college)

53

Importantly, pathfinders have recognised and institutionalised the value of CPD across their organisations. Individual development is focused on national CoVE programme objectives. There was evidence that staff development opportunities are created for part-time and visiting lecturing staff, and of work to support staff providing cover for those involved in pathfinder–employer liaison.

54

Pathfinders know that their staff want to learn. Interviews with teaching and technical staff revealed a keen interest in keeping up to date with industrial developments. The particular requirements of such staff are understood by pathfinders, who put in place arrangements that will facilitate learning by staff who may be experts in their field:
At this level, learning is about facilitating learning between people, not experts teaching novices.
 (Head of staff development, pathfinder college)

55

Staff development activities were often based on sharing good practice among practitioners. All 16 pathfinders had received money from the Standards Fund for the dissemination of good practice, and a significant number are Beacon Colleges, which have a similar responsibility.

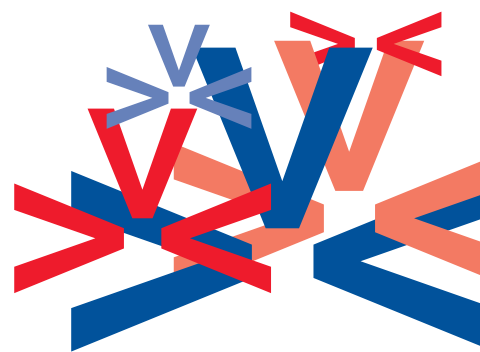
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Sharing the learning outcomes of such staff development activities was not always confined to CoVE pathfinder staff. In some of the larger general FE colleges, the pathfinder experience was harnessed by a college-wide development unit to further staff development across the college and beyond:
Carrying out teaching in the same way year after year isn't an option – even if it was, it wouldn't be very exciting would it? The pattern here is to identify what's needed and how we can deliver it. It's a real eye opener to me when other colleges come here and say they can't do this and that because their staff can't do it. They obviously think their staff can't learn anything new. Not a good role model for an educational institution. And how boring for the staff to churn out the same courses in the same way all the time. I had an argument with a mathematician about this. He put forward the 'universal truths' argument. Our argument wasn't with two and two always equalling four, it was about half his class not knowing why. That called for a different way of teaching – which he needed to learn.
 (Principal, pathfinder college)

Staff commitment

57

One remarkable feature shared by pathfinder CoVEs was the length of service of staff. This tended to be above average at 10 years and over, even for part-time staff. Departmental heads reported very low staff turnover rates, which in many instances bucked the trend of the college overall. For example, a large IT pathfinder had a 3.4% annual staff turnover for IT lecturers, compared to 17% for the college as a whole. Given that many lecturers work in areas of skill shortages and could earn significantly more outside the college, this is even more impressive.



58

Senior management acknowledged the pay deficit, and believed the explanation may lie in job satisfaction and strong staff commitment:

They get a buzz out of seeing these learners achieve something. (Head of school, pathfinder college)

It's a vocation – they are not in it just for the money.

(Head of school, pathfinder college)

It's all about the students. The approach and enthusiasm of this team gives students a learning experience that is second to none – being a CoVE is down to them.

(Head of department, pathfinder college)

Employers

Relationships

59

An over-riding feature of pathfinders was staff contact with, and knowledge about, their employer base at all levels. Employers were made welcome in colleges, and staff visited employer premises frequently. Staff were constantly exploring new ways of working with employers and were themselves active within the industry. The process was two-way, and there were instances of employers being involved directly in programme reviews.

60

This active involvement meant that staff possessed a keen awareness of current thinking and practices and had close contact with employers and other key industry players. As a result, employers see lecturers as 'industry experts with a pragmatic approach to learning rather than classroom-based academics'.

61

The relationship between employers and college staff was characterised by a strong sense of mutual understanding and eagerness to develop relationships and practices that would benefit both parties:

When X college approaches us, they come with a well-thought-out proposal which meets a need we have specified – admittedly usually not very well! They will want something in return, which is absolutely fine because we are both going to get something out of it. They're quite different from some other colleges who always approach us with a 'begging bowl' with nothing in it for us.

(Employer, engineering industry)

62

The close ties with industry and the culture of co-operation between college staff and employers also present huge benefits for learners. In particular, the focus on employer expectations was helpful for students who were not work-based.

63

Relationships between pathfinders and employers ranged from highly informal to highly formal. Understandably, smaller employers tended to have less formal partnership arrangements. In these instances, CoVE staff were familiar with their more flexible working styles and responded appropriately.

64

By contrast, one college had drawn up a quasi-contract as a means of formalising its partnership with an employer. There was certainly a feeling among pathfinder lecturing staff that firming up relations would benefit both the college and its students, as well as helping develop future CoVE proposals.

Reputation

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Pathfinders stressed that they had been focal points for their sector regionally or nationally for a very long time and had been excellent for at least 10 years. Most had emerged from specialist institutions, even if the nature of the specialisms had changed since their origin, which in some cases went back to Victorian times. Many could point to a cadre of employers and managers who had passed through their hands, and alumni networks were encouraged by many pathfinders. It was not unusual for relationships with employers to be over 50 years

old and to have survived changes of ownership as well as dramatic changes in the curriculum and modes of delivery: *X college was very helpful to this company 50 years ago when we went from one retail unit to two. They've helped with our expansions by providing bespoke training as well as keeping us in line with required industry standing. We are now the fourth biggest of our kind. I went there 20 years ago (and qualified). I am now a director of the company with responsibility for, among other things, training. I sit on the National Regulatory Body for this industry.* (Director, chain of opticians)

Well, they've been here since 1841 – that's longer than most universities. I was an apprentice here – they helped me to degree level. I know all the lecturers. I have had a number of jobs in the sector both with the NTO and industry. The college has always had a part to play. Importantly, when the sector was on its knees, the college bailed out many local employers by taking in or making arrangements for apprentices for whom there was no work in the yards. Employers don't forget that, so now there's a bit of an upturn we see the college as central to our plans.

(Training manager, shipbuilding company)

[The printing] industry has changed dramatically – it used to be all demarcation and restriction, holding back on technological change. We recognised that it had to change but there was enormous inertia. A lot of it was simply wiped out. Most of the big firms did no training for 10-15 years. When the technology did start to change you had largely self-taught people or people who had gained their knowledge from people trained 20 years ago. People knew what to do but not why. As a result, the new technology was always breaking down. The college has been superb at retraining people – people here had kept up to date. You can now get access to underpinning knowledge via net-tutorials and there's a whole new generation of M[odern] A[pprentices] and other young qualified people coming through the college. Here they understand the history but they can see the future. They are always looking for ways to help. (Senior union official, printing company)

66

Other pathfinders were able to point to a long and distinguished track record as partners with employers and local economic development groups:

We need a different way of working with people being linked to a project not a specific employer – but we need high standards for the sector to win contracts against international competition. The college is central to delivering this and is a real asset as a name when we are bidding. The CoVE status is nice but really only acknowledges what the industry already knows. (RDA)

67

Building this kind of reputation from scratch will be a serious challenge for CoVEs of the future.

Employer networks

68

Involvement with employers extended to other stakeholder groups such as employer associations and trade organisations. In almost all pathfinders, these contacts permeated throughout all levels, and staff could give details of the membership of various committees and groups. Staff felt that they needed to be involved in these networks as part of their specialist job profile. At one focus group, pathfinder staff listed no fewer than 15 networks within which they represented the college. These included their NTO, local and national employers' groups, specialist committees of their industry regulator, national examination councils, a committee of the local TUC, a Local Development Agency sector group and a local regeneration agency. They had also started a social forum where local employers could meet over a drink and a sandwich to: *swap trade gossip and network in an informal way. This works really well because the smaller employers feel more able to get involved and we've been able to broker a few deals. We have a nice centre that the employers contributed to so it's nice to open it up to them three or four times a year as a way of saying 'thank you'. Also, of course, it gives them a chance to see any developments here – we make sure that there's someone to show them round informally.* (Vice-principal, pathfinder college)



We get a real buzz from knowing our tutor is a leader in the field and is widely published in the specialist journals.

(Learner, pathfinder college)

69

Staff at all levels were able to report that selection as a pathfinder CoVE had increased their propensity to get out and about, to try new ways of contacting or maintaining contact with employers. In a few cases, consultancy contracts had emerged with employers.

Meeting employer needs

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Pathfinders and their staff were clear that, unless the needs of employers are met, learners will not find suitable jobs in which they can develop and succeed. Teaching staff in particular were very proud of the vocational aspect of their job. One described a previous post in which what they did operated against the interests of employers and students alike:

I came here from [a neighbouring college]. If you talked to employers, you were seen as letting the side down. With work-based students you gave employers only what they had to have – attendance, grades and so on. You certainly didn't encourage employers to visit, and on your visits to them, you made it very clear that you were either there to inspect them – H[ealth] and S[afety] etc – or to assess the apprentice. There was a very strong culture of not asking questions because you might find out something you didn't want to know or couldn't do anything about.

(Senior lecturer, pathfinder college)

71

The impact of the pathfinders on employers was perhaps obscured by the close ties that already existed between pathfinder colleges and employers. At the time of the research (seven months after the pathfinders were selected), it would be hard to judge the benefits over and above those already accrued from employers working with these excellent colleges over time. For their part, employers that were interviewed already appreciated that pathfinders were genuinely providing an excellent service for training and more widely.

72

Even so, some positive effects were observed. For example, it has been common practice for some employers to give, lend or service equipment – either of their own manufacture or a type used in their day-to-day business – to colleges so that trainees can use up-to-date machinery. However, employers are inclined to spread such generosity across a number of colleges within a region. Being part of the CoVE programme is likely to concentrate gifts of equipment on recognised centres:

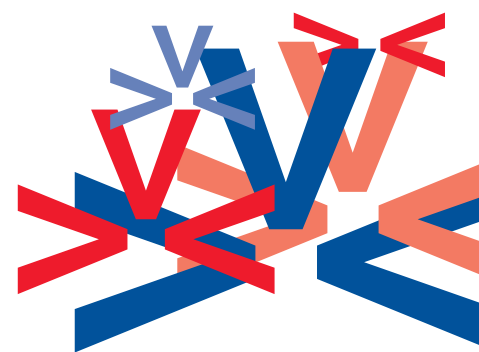
We have always given equipment to colleges and made spaces available to them on vendor training sessions. If the CoVEs are a strategic initiative, we will be strategic too and support regional centres. (Employer, equipment manufacturer)

73

Many employers were excited about the additional benefits that the CoVE would bring for trainees, who were seen as being potential beneficiaries of newer and better facilities and equipment than already existed. To some extent, selection as a pathfinder was seen by employers as a badging exercise, and a worthwhile one which encouraged them to invest and donate more equipment to the CoVE.

74

The extent to which pathfinder colleges were ahead of the game in terms of equipment is not to be underestimated. One principal recalled a recent visit by a colleague from a neighbouring college who expressed great admiration for equipment spotted in transit, in a corridor. The visitor was reportedly amazed to discover that it was indeed in transit – but on its way out for disposal, not installation.



75

Employers also reported that having trainees that are trained at a CoVE might have a bearing on their ability to tender successfully, although this was a fairly tentative feeling at this stage:

You put everything that might conceivably affect a decision into a tender. Customers are increasingly concerned about having a competent workforce carrying out work. We usually submit a competency framework as part of a bid and CoVE status is much the same. At the moment it may be marginal but it's worth putting in. (Employer)

76

Significantly, employers welcomed the CoVE programme as important in tackling skill shortages and raising the profile of craft training. Employers in engineering and catering particularly felt that vocational training had become the 'Cinderella' of education and training. They shared a view that although craft and technician level expertise was the backbone of wealth creation, it receives less attention than most academic education.

77

Other employers, especially SMEs, drew similar parallels with their own training in the technical colleges before the mid-1970s. They saw their training as having been vocationally orientated and, more to the point, to have stood them in good stead in retaining and obtaining progression in employment.

78

Many employers recognised and valued the potential of pathfinder CoVEs to meet 'whole workforce' upskilling requirements in flexible ways that acknowledge the needs of older, more experienced workers as well as new recruits to the sector. Employers, even in very traditional sectors such as agriculture, said that change would produce new learning needs throughout a working life:

Recent events have shaken any beliefs I had about this being a stable industry. I have had to make plans for diversification and the college has been great about offering advice. At a practical level I have got some new qualifications for certain types of machinery so I can now offer myself as a subcontractor to others. (Farmer)

Learners

79

All the CoVE pathfinders described themselves as very student-centred and there was a lot of evidence for this. Many had tutorials on demand available 12 hours a day and held additional small classes and discussion groups. Well-planned teaching offered learners a wide variety of modes of delivery and styles of participation.

80

Staff were very clear that attendance and student motivation were the keys to success. Staff knew their students well, and cared about their achievements. All the pathfinders already had very effective student tracking and support systems. Careful monitoring ensured that lapses in attendance or other problems were nipped in the bud. The pathfinder CoVE reinforced the benefits of working this way.

Programmes

81

Most pathfinders could point to their use of innovative and flexible approaches to training and learning. These include a lot of computer-based training, such as interactive tutorials on the intranet and the Internet, self-paced assessments and so on. Pathfinders had found ways to make these available on employer premises, making learning accessible in a flexible and efficient way, and freeing up staff time.

82

Selection as a CoVE pathfinder meant that staff felt confident of introducing these kinds of development more quickly than they would otherwise have done. Such innovations had usually led to income generation.

Learner views

83

Learners spoke very highly of their tutors, reflecting the 'total focus' on the student experience. It was clear that excellent relationships existed between staff and students, and learners were positively effusive about their training. Hearing a group of 18 year olds talk about their tutors as: 'passionate about their subject'; 'really wanting us to succeed'; 'totally on top of their subject' and 'never caught out' was particularly impressive.

84

As far as pathfinder CoVEs were concerned, it would have been unrealistic to expect students to be aware of all the plans and developments taking place. Some students simply may not have experienced them, and those associated with a college for two or three years could have seen changes that were unrelated to the pathfinder CoVE.

85

Even so, learners in the focus groups seemed largely aware of the pathfinder CoVE, and felt proud to be a part of it. Some of the practical benefits they had experienced were:

- more and better resources coming on stream;
- better employment prospects; and
- a very high standard of education from top-quality teaching staff.

86

As one student put it:

We get a real buzz from knowing our tutor is a leader in the field and is widely published in the specialist journals.

(Learner, pathfinder college)

87

Learners were asked why they had chosen a particular college. Many were there having felt a strong vocation for a specialist area of training from an early age. Most told researchers that the main reason for choosing a particular college course was 'reputation' and the most common route for referral was 'word of mouth'. Many learners had been part of an informal network involving the pathfinder CoVE department before they joined. For younger learners, this might be a family connection, especially in agriculture, or an employer's preference, particularly in maritime and nautical studies or some branches of engineering. Typical comments included:

Everyone knows X college is the best – it's got the best reputation. I could have gone to a college six miles from my home but I came here and am residential because it's the best.

(Learner, pathfinder college)

My employer wanted me to come here because he says it's the best. He did his qualification here and knows most of the tutors.

(Learner, pathfinder college)

88

That is not to say that the colleges do not take positive steps to increase inclusion among deprived or excluded communities. Many worked closely with schools, Saturday clubs and community groups, and ran widespread marketing campaigns.

Intra-college relations

89

The impact of the pathfinder programme on non-CoVE colleges was minimal at the time of the research. This was primarily because pathfinders had only just begun good practice dissemination activities, and the overall profile of the CoVE programme was relatively low. However, there were a number of instances where non-CoVE colleges had derived benefits from interaction with pathfinder CoVEs. The most significant effect was on non-CoVE colleges that were seeking advice and guidance on putting together their own CoVE proposals.

90

Colleges tended to avoid approaching local or neighbouring colleges as they were seen to be in competition. Instead, colleges would approach pathfinders situated across county borders where competition was significantly diminished.

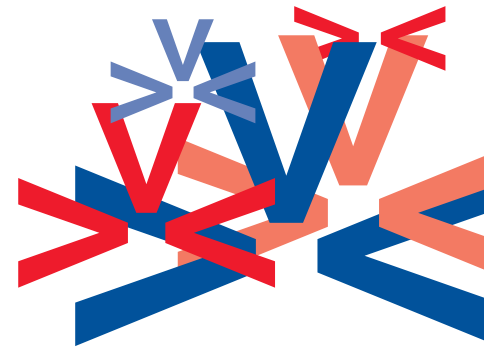
91

A small number of non-CoVE colleges were proactive in arranging visits to pathfinder CoVEs to learn about their practices. Again, these were mainly colleges that were developing CoVE proposals for some point in the future and wishing to develop the kinds of practice needed to become a CoVE.

Future of the CoVE programme

92

The pathfinder experience is not directly analogous to the roll-out of the main programme but there are useful lessons to be learned (see paragraph 9).



93

Although staff in pathfinder colleges were pleased to have been selected, some raised concerns about the subsequent rounds of CoVE roll-out. Without exception, pathfinders saw themselves as already offering excellence, making development as a CoVE a natural consequence of what had already been achieved. Senior staff felt that the increasing number of applicants might not already be achieving excellent standards: *We know that the CoVE area is excellent. Even within this college which has a number of grade 1 inspection reports to its credit, it stands out as a star department. It's right that should be acknowledged. But there's a difference between acknowledging star status and acknowledging **potential**, which is what each subsequent round will increasingly become.* (Principal, pathfinder college)

94

Staff from non-CoVE colleges or areas of colleges that were not part of the pathfinder CoVE were also interviewed. Some of these had made CoVE submissions for the first round. Their views on their failure to be selected to join the CoVE programme on this occasion were revealing. Among more senior staff, there was a feeling that no matter how excellent a part of the college was, unless its outputs were linked to a defined economic and employment strategic need, it could not become a CoVE:

We are definitely the best trainer of our kind in the region. We run bespoke training for all the local distributors – but apparently we are not a local strategic priority. Perhaps it would be more of a priority if we weren't doing it and already fulfilling the need. (Head of department, non-CoVE college)

95

Principals and senior staff in these colleges believed that the CoVE programme was being used as a 'carrot' to bring about more general improvements within colleges. They were concerned too that its effectiveness as an incentive might diminish quite quickly and may even be reversed if the reward was seen to be unachievable:

We have had two grade 1 inspections in a row. We have purpose-built millennium-funded facilities. We have community outposts involving thousands of local people. We have excellent progression rates to HE and our students go on to employment and self-employment as artists and craft workers. They keep their

links with the college and make a huge difference to the local culture and economy. But we're not accepted as a CoVE. It raises some questions about how these judgements are made. Still there are other accolades which are more important to us'. (Head of school, non-CoVE college)

96

The same senior managers felt that the selection process will increasingly have to be driven by strategic skill needs (demand) rather than the existing excellence in colleges (supply). As far as the future CoVE programme is concerned, pathfinder CoVE colleges were content with the selection and development process. However, there were concerns at all levels about the roll-out process beyond the pathfinder stage, especially in relation to the need to demonstrate relevance to a strategic skills needs agenda, which seems to some colleges to be less than transparent. They were worried about meeting difficult skills needs in areas where the current provision was poor quality or non-existent:

In some areas you're going to have to create excellence out of nothing if you are going to meet employers' needs. These needs may be from employers who have never engaged with a college. (Principal, college)

97

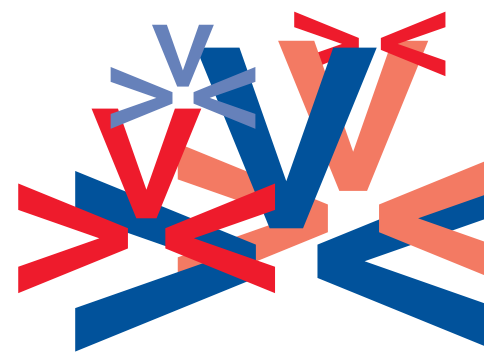
Unease among colleges about the part that the identification of strategic skills needs plays in the selection process was also reflected in the widespread view that colleges have a good understanding of their markets and changing skills needs. Many members of staff felt that much labour market information is of limited value in predicting future skills levels especially at a very local level where one factory closure (or expansion) could bring about major local changes in supply and demand.

98

It was widely believed that local LSCs will exert greater influence as they become better able to predict demand through a combination of better data and organisational maturity. However, some senior staff felt that the strategic remit of the LSC was not clear in the context of CoVE selection and development. This meant that, from the colleges' point of view, the 'strategic' element of the selection process during the pathfinder phase was not sufficiently transparent to allow them to focus activity on areas of improvement and development.

In some areas you're going to have to create excellence out of nothing if you are going to meet employers' needs. These needs may be from employers who have never engaged with a college.

(Principal, college)



Conclusions

99

It was felt that feedback on proposals from the local LSCs needs to be far more detailed in future to avoid damaging working relationships between colleges and the LSC, and to balance the effort that has gone into producing proposals. Feedback needs to be related to strategic skills shortages as well as quality issues.

100

It is the overall conclusion of this report that the 16 pathfinder CoVEs have been successful in implementing development plans and making changes that are appropriate for CoVEs in general. Selection as a CoVE pathfinder has had a positive effect both in CoVE departments and across pathfinder colleges more widely.

101

The impact on other colleges, learners, employers and partners as a direct result of becoming a pathfinder is difficult to gauge, primarily because it is too early to see these more widespread effects. However, evidence is emerging to suggest that when the CoVE programme is more established and its profile is raised, non-CoVE colleges, employers and other relevant organisations will benefit from interactions and partnership working with CoVE colleges.

102

The number of colleges with learning areas that meet the exacting pathfinder CoVE criteria is limited. When overlaid by a requirement for a regional spread, the supply is further reduced. Specific skills shortages are unlikely to map neatly onto the available supply of excellent or even potentially excellent college partners. In fact, logic tells us that the reverse is true – many strategic skills shortages exist **because** there is no provision of adequate training in the area or, even, more widely.

103

With each successive round of roll-out, it seems likely that the number of potential CoVEs will diminish. Demands to meet increasingly local major strategic skills needs may well outstrip the available supply of excellence. Providers that are preparing proposals may not just be marginally short of the mark but only beginning to develop provision in these areas.

104

It follows that excellence of the sort researchers observed in pathfinder CoVEs must be created and nurtured. Our recommendations (see paragraphs 105–110) are intended to offer a specific direction for organisations to achieve this.

Recommendations

Learning and Skills Council

105

The LSC needs to:

- ensure that the roles of different organisations with involvement in the implementation of the CoVE programme are explicit and understood;
- give clear and consistent guidance to existing CoVEs as well as aspiring CoVEs;
- raise the profile of CoVE through marketing and promotional activities to ensure buy-in from colleges, employers and other key players;
- ensure that the selection criteria for CoVEs are clear and transparent and that the balance between developing high-quality provision and meeting skills needs is addressed appropriately;
- take a lead role in implementing the evaluation framework, ensuring, as far as possible, that colleges are not burdened with additional bureaucracy and that benefits are transparent;
- ensure that a targeted approach for identifying potential CoVEs that meet priority skills needs is utilised, to ensure that only those learning centres with a reasonable chance of becoming a CoVE put forward proposals.

Local Learning and Skills Councils

106

The strategic and operational role of local LSCs needs to be clear and understood by colleges and other interested parties, particularly with regard to feedback on proposals and decisions on proposals.

107

Local LSCs need to:

- work closely with colleges, SSCs and RDAs in the identification of skills gaps and shortages, and in supporting training and development programmes that seek to alleviate these gaps and shortages;
- have a key role in driving through the evaluation process for CoVEs. Guided by the evaluation framework that is being developed, they will need to work closely with colleges and other stakeholders to ensure data are collected and collated in a rigorous and burden-free manner;

- allocate resources – which may include training of staff – to ensure CoVE colleges are adequately supported and that the evaluation is conducted effectively.

108

Since the compilation of this report, the LSC has addressed some of the issues raised. These are given in summary below.

Encouraging excellence in subsequent rounds

- good practice identified in the pathfinders and others is being shared with the CoVE network;
- specialist development groups, facilitated by the LSDA, are enabling CoVEs in broadly similar vocational areas to work together and transfer good practice;
- messages on what makes a successful CoVE (for example, as suggested in this report) have been included in LSC guidance; and
- the CoVE programme is an investment in excellence, meaning all CoVEs are expected to show continuous improvement in quality.

Identification of skills shortages

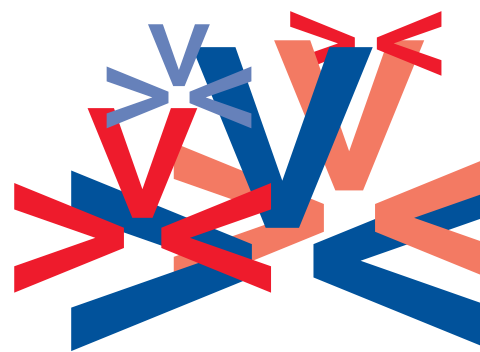
- skills priorities groups have been established in LSC;
- the LSC will undertake employer and household surveys to discover skills gaps; and
- LSC regional moderation of CoVE proposals now established.

Balance between skills needs and high quality

- CoVE criteria enhanced to reflect more clearly this balance, together with programme updates and guidance notes.

Role in evaluation framework and reduction in bureaucracy

- arrangements for monitoring individual CoVEs and evaluating the CoVE national programme are being developed to complement each other; and
- evaluation framework will be tested and further refined in Phase Two evaluation in early 2003.



Involvement of RDAs

- RDA involvement has been developed, and RDAs are represented on a number of CoVE-specific LSC groups.

CoVEs in the development phase

109

New CoVEs need to:

- work closely with local LSCs, LSDA, SSCs and RDAs to ensure skill needs are monitored and addressed accordingly;
- work hard to develop strong and formalised links with employers and further develop partnership working arrangements to enable the development of additional and innovative programmes to meet skills priorities;
- ensure that their information and management systems are not only high quality, but are workable and generating good results;
- ensure that systems have feedback mechanisms in place so that reporting and learning can take place at all levels of the organisation;
- ensure that development plans are treated as 'rolling documents' and that systems are in place to monitor and evaluate progress in collaboration with key partners; and
- establish and use impact measures early on in the process to feed into evaluation from the start. When setting targets they should ensure they are specific, measurable, and attainable within specified timescales.

Aspiring or potential CoVEs

110

Colleges and providers developing CoVE proposals need to:

- work closely, first and foremost with the local LSC, and with relevant partners including LSDA, SSCs and RDAs in the identification of local and regional skill needs;
- be proactive in their market research activities, keeping abreast with employer and industry needs;
- recognise that existing CoVEs, including pathfinders, are a genuine source of advice and guidance and that they would do well to form relationships with an appropriate existing CoVE;
- look closely at the skills and experience of their staff and ensure that the staff development process is well supported;
- be closely attuned to learners – potential, current and past;
- seek partnerships with other institutions to consider forming a joint CoVE;
- consider funding needed for pre-CoVE development work.

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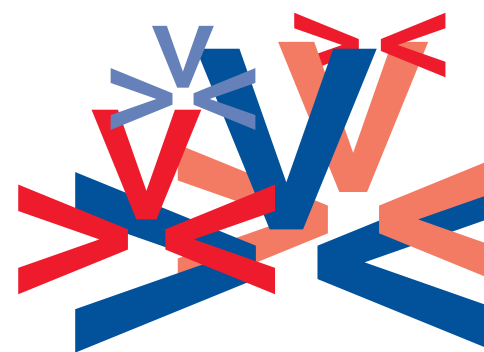
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Learning and Skills Development Agency	www.lsd.gov.uk
Lifelong Learning	www.lifelonglearning.co.uk
National Training Organisations	www.nto-nc.org.uk
Office for Standards in Education	www.ofsted.gov.uk
Regional Development Agencies	www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk
Sector Skills Development Agency	www.ssda.org.uk



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- employers.

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Pathfinder Colleges and their CoVE Areas

Accrington and Rossendale College
(construction crafts)

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth
(lens-based media)

Barking and Havering Colleges
(automotive engineering)

Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies
(hospitality and catering)

Bishop Burton College
(agriculture)

Bradford College
(applied science)

Lancaster and Morecambe College
(hospitality and catering)

Leeds College of Technology
(print media)

Lewisham College
(computing)

Richmond Adult and Community College
(business and IT)

South Birmingham College
(childcare)

South East Essex College
(media technology)

South Tyneside College
(national nautical centre of excellence)

Sparsholt College
(game, wildlife and countryside management and fishery studies)

Tameside College
(engineering)

Warwickshire College
(general engineering)

Notes

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