



**Office for Standards
in Education**

Focused provision 16 to 19

A survey of colleges with sixth form centres

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Introduction

1. This report examines the arrangements made by some general further education (GFE) and tertiary colleges to provide at least some of their provision for 16- to 19-year-old students in a 'focused' way, notably through the establishment of 'sixth form centres'. The report covers the findings of a survey by Ofsted of a sample of such colleges during October 2003 to February 2004.
2. The structure of the report is based, in the main, on the Common Inspection Framework.

Survey

3. The survey sought to identify the extent to which the provision of sixth form centres enhances the experiences of 16- to 19-year-old learners, particularly in relation to the range of provision available, the quality of guidance and support, the quality of teaching and learning and the pattern of students' achievement. During 2003/04 one of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and three seconded additional inspectors made visits to 18 GFE and tertiary colleges in England, all of which had established sixth form centres catering primarily for 16- to 19-year-old learners. The survey involved discussions with managers, teachers and students and also drew substantially upon evidence from the colleges' previous Ofsted inspection reports, together with self-assessment reports and other documents provided by the colleges. Comparisons were also made with the general findings from Ofsted inspections of all colleges.

Summary

4. There is a wide range of institutional arrangements made by GFE and tertiary colleges to provide 'focused' provision for 16- to 19-year-old students. While sixth form centres constitute the most common format, they vary greatly in terms of their physical location within colleges and in the size and the scope and range of provision for which they are responsible. Other key differences include: the degree of separation between the experiences of 16 to 19 year olds and adult learners within the college environment; the nature of relations with other local providers, particularly schools; and the context of the local area. There are some similarities between sixth form centres in terms of the extent to which they seek to establish a distinctive 'ethos' for this provision. Reflecting a general trend among GFE and tertiary colleges, a significant number of centres also have a strong commitment to social and educational inclusion and to widening participation.

5. The predominant type of provision found in sixth form centres is based around a core of GCE A level courses. Most colleges in the sample offer a broad range of subjects within their sixth form centres but in general the range is no broader than that found in sixth form colleges and some GFE colleges that do not provide separate 16 to 19 provision. In addition to GCE A level, some sixth form centres include a mix of vocational and academic options. A few sixth form centres

concentrate entirely on vocational qualifications. Few students chose to combine GCE A level subjects with vocational qualifications such as AVCEs. Enrichment activities feature strongly in the general ethos of sixth form centres but, as with the post-16 sector as a whole, provision is not well monitored and student participation is patchy. Key skills are delivered in all sixth form centres but are generally unpopular with students, few of whom complete their key skills portfolios. Arrangements for students to engage in independent study while at college are underdeveloped. There is very little use of college intranets and virtual learning environments (VLEs) to support independent learning. These findings are similar to those reflected in Ofsted inspection reports for all colleges.

6. Students' achievements in sixth form centres, in terms of examination passes and overall retention rates, are broadly in line with the national averages for GFE and tertiary colleges. In colleges with a pattern of improving retention and achievement there are some indications that the organisational arrangements within sixth form centres, while not unique to them, may have contributed to this improvement.

7. There is little evidence to suggest that colleges with sixth form centres seek to develop a distinctive approach to teaching and learning for students aged 16 to 19 or that the quality of teaching and learning is demonstratively better than is found in the post-16 sector as a whole. The quality of most teaching and learning in sixth form centres is, as is the case in colleges generally, at least satisfactory and much of it is good. In overall terms, these colleges perform at around the average for GFE and tertiary colleges.

8. The quality of accommodation in sixth form centres is variable. In some cases, centres are located in new purpose-built buildings with excellent facilities, whereas in others accommodation is cramped and some is of poor quality. Library and learning resources are generally good. Some centres lack access to specialist facilities and some lack student recreation and support areas.

9. Colleges generally provide good-quality advice and guidance to students. Those with sixth form centres are no exception. Initial advice and guidance arrangements are particularly good and are similar to the findings for the post-16 sector as a whole. Colleges have developed close relationships with local schools and make a wide range of information available to prospective students. There are extensive and well-developed arrangements for supporting students once they join the college. Particular attention is given to monitoring students' attendance and punctuality. There are generally good arrangements for identifying and providing for students' additional support needs although in a few colleges the student take up of such support is low. Tutorial systems are generally used well to monitor students' progress. There is a strong emphasis on regularly reporting students' progress both to themselves and to parents and guardians. Careers advice and guidance provision is extensive and of good quality.

10. Colleges generally have clear management arrangements for their focused 16 to 19 provision. They identify several advantages in these arrangements including the emphasis on raising standards and improving the experiences of students aged 16 to 19, enhanced relationships with local schools, good curriculum co-ordination and an enhanced focus on performance and quality assurance. However, there are also

some difficulties and tensions in the management of sixth form centres. Staff are sometimes subject to conflicting demands and expectations from different management teams within the college and there are inconsistencies in some aspects of cross-college provision and services. Focused provision for 16 to 19 year olds features strongly in colleges' overall strategic planning. In many cases it is now being aligned with a wider strategic focus on 14- to 19-year-old learners. Colleges' quality assurance arrangements covering their sixth form centre provision are similar to those found in the post-16 sector as a whole. Particular emphasis is placed on providing relevant staff development to meet the needs of 16- to 19-year-old learners.

11. There is considerable variation in the extent to which colleges with sixth forms engage in collaborative work with local schools and colleges. Where such developments are taking place it is often in response to Ofsted area inspections and aimed at rationalising and improving post-16 provision within the area in which the college is situated.

12. Colleges generally have good awareness of the relative costs of provision within their sixth form centres although few carry out extensive analysis of their cost-effectiveness. High recruitment patterns combined with an overall pattern of good and often improving student retention and achievement indicates that sixth form centres as units within colleges provide good value for money.

Survey in depth

Nature of provision

13. The survey sought to identify common characteristics of 'focused provision' for 16 to 19 year olds within colleges and draw comparisons with colleges which do not seek to organise their provision in this way. At an early stage in the survey, however, it became clear that there are significant differences between colleges in terms of the institutional arrangements made to provide separate provision for 16- to 19-year-old students; this, in itself, makes general comparison difficult. While a common feature of all the colleges chosen for the sample was that they all identified and organised some aspect of their 16 to 19 provision as a 'sixth form centre', the exact nature, content and scope of such provision is extremely varied.

14. Sixth form centres occupy very different physical locations within colleges. In its most developed sense, the centre is characterised by a totally separate building either within a college campus or located on a completely separate campus. In 6 of the 17 colleges surveyed, such provision was purpose-built and of relatively recent origin. In other cases, the centre occupies a substantial part of a multi-purpose college building, perhaps ranging from several floors of a tower block to, in its least developed form, a single corridor of one floor.

15. In practice, the degree of physical separation of sixth form centres from other elements of the colleges in which they are located is sometimes less well developed than would be apparent from the images presented in some colleges' publicity material, where great care is taken to create an impression of a very separate type of

provision for 16- to 19-year-old students. Several colleges acknowledge that their sixth form centres occupy more of a conceptual rather than a distinct, physically identifiable presence within the college. For example, one tertiary college has organised its provision into two 'colleges' – a 'sixth form college' and an 'adult college'. The two colleges do not have separate physical locations or any clearly separate physical identity, rather they are organised around different attendance times. During the day, the curriculum provision is largely for full-time students aged 16 to 19 with no infill of adult students, for example to GCE A level provision. In the evening, the adult college operates and caters largely for students aged 19 plus.

16. The size and scope of the focused provision varies considerably. In the sample colleges, the number of students organised within the sixth form centre varied from less than 100 to upwards of 2,000 in four of the largest colleges. Many of the colleges in the sample reported an increased trend in the enrolments to their sixth form centres.

In one large college in the West Midlands, the college's sixth form provision is spread across 25 centres. One centre is designated as an all female 'Women's Academy'. It offers provision, largely at advanced level, to young women, many of whom are from minority ethnic groups who had performed well at single-sex secondary schools but who were not progressing into further education.

A large GFE college in the north west has nine sixth form centres, six of which are located on school sites and operate on a partnership basis with the schools. A strong emphasis has been placed on tailoring provision to meet the needs of the local community and to shape the sixth form curriculum around the school's specialist status.

One of the largest sixth form centres in the sample enrolls around 1,200 students. The college established its focused provision some years ago but has experienced significant growth since opening a purpose-built centre in 2000. Over the last three years it has enrolled 300 additional 16 to 18 full-time students, predominantly through a major growth in GCE AS level provision. Over 20% of the college's 16- to 18-year-old students come from outside the relatively affluent borough within which it is situated. Just over 9% of them are of minority ethnic origin compared with a borough average of 6.1%.

Scope of provision

17. The predominant pattern is for colleges to focus on GCE AS and A2 courses, often with a broad range of individual subjects on offer. In two of the sample colleges, however, the sixth form centre deliberately did not include any standalone GCE A level provision but focused instead on AVCEs and other vocational qualifications. Both colleges had deliberately chosen not to include major A level provision within their centres in order not to compete with other institutions, mainly sixth form colleges and school sixth forms in the immediate locality.

One college in the north west does not offer GCE AS and A2 levels as discrete courses in its sixth form centre but rather as additional qualifications to students'

main vocational programmes. Students wishing to take a full GCE A level programme go to the local sixth form college.

18. At one extreme, colleges intend their sixth form centres to offer students aged 16 to 19 a completely separate learning experience from that offered to adult students. This is commonly the case in those centres which are purpose-built, or have a separate physical location. These colleges generally have separate reception areas for 16- to 19-year-old students and provide dedicated learning resource centres and student common rooms. In the vast majority of sample colleges some, if not all, of the teaching is organised around groups of this age range. In many cases, however, the degree of separation between students of different ages is not completely clear cut. Some centres, for example, allow adult students to infill into classes of predominantly 16 to 19 students, in other cases colleges recognise that it is not cost effective for them to provide entirely separate provision for students of different age groups (particularly in the case of some vocational courses) and it is even more likely in these colleges that some facilities, such as refectories, learning resource centres and advice and guidance centres will be shared.

One college has two sixth form centres located in adjacent towns. The two sites are very different in nature. One of the sixth form centres is housed in a separate single-storey building in its own grounds one mile from the town centre, whereas the other occupies four floors of a seven-storey building within walking distance of the town centre. The separately housed centre conveys more of a sixth form 'ethos', shaped partially by its physical isolation and relatively small size. The other centre has shared facilities and there is no student common room and nowhere that the sixth form centre students can call their own. College staff identify difficulties in creating a similar ethos at this centre.

19. Another key area of difference relates to the particular circumstances under which sixth form centre provision has been developed and the social and educational characteristics of the area in which they are located. In some of the sample colleges, for example, a form of focused provision for 16 to 19 year olds has been a relatively long-standing arrangement, particularly where a tertiary system is in existence, although its exact nature may have changed over time. Several colleges in the sample are located in areas where most schools cater for pupils aged 11 to 16. These colleges have taken steps in recent years to further highlight the distinctiveness of their largely academic 'sixth form' provision, often in response to demands from the local community. Other centres are products of merger, for example between previously separated sixth form colleges and general further education colleges within a particular area. In some cases, the current nature of the sixth form centre appears to have developed in response to demand, for example in areas where there are perceived deficiencies in school sixth form provision.

20. One area of general similarity between the sample colleges is the extent to which they aim to establish a distinct ethos for focused 16 to 19 provision. This was a clear feature in almost all of the colleges sampled and is reflected in several aspects of the provision, and most notably in the approach to providing support and guidance for students with an emphasis placed on personal development. One clear example of this approach is illustrated in an extract from a college's 'position paper':

'We have created an ethos which applies to all full-time 16 to 19 students, inside and outside of the sixth form centre. This focuses on creating a stimulating and adult learning environment within a well disciplined culture. We emphasise the importance of young people developing the skills to become autonomous learners and invest in the support they need to develop these skills and to achieve. We make it clear that we expect high standards of attendance and performance and we monitor students carefully. We have a student contract, good tutorial support, action planning with regular reviews of progress and parental involvement.'

21. Some of the sample colleges have deliberately based their provision on what are perceived to be features of school sixth forms and, more particularly, sixth form colleges.

In one centre staff have consciously tried to imitate features of a sixth form college. A handbook for students features a 'homework diary' section and prominence is given to parents' evenings and regular reports to parents. There is a newsletter specific to the sixth form centre and the centre has its own page on the college's website. All of these features have helped to create a distinctive ethos.

As part of its 'ethos', another sixth form centre holds 'assemblies' on a half-termly basis. These are non-religious events, mainly used for presentational purposes and notice-giving but they intentionally aim to capture some of the distinctive atmosphere of a school sixth form or sixth form college.

22. One further significant feature of the ethos in many of the sample colleges is the extent to which the focused provision is underpinned by the strong commitment to social and educational inclusion which is a feature of the institution within which it is located. Many of the colleges draw their students from areas with high levels of social and educational deprivation and, in line with a general trend in the post-16 sector, they show success in widening participation among groups that are not traditionally engaged in education. In some cases, colleges have established their sixth form centres within the community, for example on secondary school sites or in college annexes, and draw the majority of their students from the local area. In these cases, centres tend to be smaller and provide a narrower range of provision.

23. Students spoken to during the survey generally recognised and appreciated the distinctive features of the sixth form centres they had chosen to attend. Many had been attracted to a sixth form centre by its relatively small size and 'contained' nature often combined with the fact that it was within easy travelling distance. However, not all students perceived the 'focused' nature of the age group as a particularly significant factor. Some felt strongly that they were part of the whole college and shared whole-college values. They especially liked coming into contact with adults and students from other courses outside the sixth form centre and felt that this enabled them to enjoy the rich life of the college more fully.

Curriculum and programmes of study

24. Factors determining the courses offered within sixth form centres include: the existing provision in local schools and other post-16 providers; previous patterns of enrolment within the centre coupled with analysis of retention and achievement

patterns. Many of the colleges use their close relationship with feeder schools to plan additions to their provision and some carry out extensive labour market research. In a more general sense, the introduction of Curriculum 2000 provided the impetus for colleges to extend the range of subject choice available within the centres.

25. By far the most predominant type of provision found in the sample colleges is based around a core of GCE A level courses. All but 2 of the 17 colleges organise their provision around a substantial core of GCE AS and A2 subjects. The other two colleges only offer a limited range of GCE AS level subjects only as additional subjects for students to take alongside a range of vocational courses, particularly AVCEs.

26. The majority of colleges offer a broad range of subjects, particularly at GCE A level. In 14 of the 17 colleges, for example, over 25 GCE AS and A2 subjects are available and six centres offer over 30 GCE AS and A2 subjects, thus making them very similar to the range of provision on offer at sixth form colleges. In general, however, the breadth of provision is not significantly different from that found in colleges without separate provision for 16- to 19-year-old students and in a few cases it is more limited. There is considerable variation in the extent to which colleges offer students a broad combination of academic and vocational programmes. Even where such arrangements are made, colleges report little success with this approach and some have instigated a movement back towards a more academic focus in their provision or a separation of academic and vocational routes possibly within the same centre. Some centres are seeking to extend the range of level 1 and 2 provision offered to students.

Approximately 70% of students in one sixth form centre live in areas designated for widening participation in education. There is a good range of programmes available for students who do not have the necessary skills to undertake level 2 or 3 programmes. These include life skills, GNVQ intermediate programmes and a first diploma in sports.

Enrichment

27. All of the sample colleges include some form of enrichment activity for students within their sixth form centres. This frequently forms part of a broader 'whole-college' programme of activities, although some elements are likely to be delivered wholly within the sixth form centre. In general, the commitment to enrichment, in principle, is very strong, and tends to be prominently promoted as part of the sixth form centre 'ethos' and rationale. However, in practice, as the college inspection evidence indicates, there is little close monitoring or evaluation of the quality of, and student participation in, enrichment activity, and the level of take-up is often low. These findings are very similar to those for the FE sector as a whole.

One college greatly expanded its enrichment programme as part of its response to Curriculum 2000. A cross-college enrichment co-ordinator has been appointed whose role includes surveying students to bring the enrichment activities on offer more into line with what they would like. Many of the activities available within its sixth form centre have been very effective. For example, trips abroad have enabled students to improve their social skills and confidence levels. This is especially true

for groups of Asian young women who would not usually be allowed by their families to leave the country. Students who visited India on a recent trip have grown so much in confidence that they have all now applied for places at university.

A 'StudentXtra' booklet at another college gives details of a wide range of enrichment activities including the Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme and Millennium Volunteers. All students in the sixth form centre are required to take part in a minimum of 30 hours of enrichment activities over the year although attendance at some activities is not monitored formally.

Key skills

28. All of the sample colleges adhered strongly to the philosophy behind key skills and stressed their potential significance particularly in terms of the often very broad intake of students within the centre. Despite this commitment, evidence from self-assessment and from the colleges' Ofsted inspection reports highlighted several aspects of ineffective management arrangements and poor achievement by students in key skills, particularly in terms of portfolio completion. The majority of colleges reported a struggle to convince students of the importance of key skills, particularly to those following GCE A level programmes. In these terms, the sample colleges exhibit very similar characteristics to those displayed in the FE sector as a whole. The most positive element of key skills provision in a number of colleges related to the use made of diagnostic screening test procedures for identifying students' key skill needs. As is the case in the FE sector in general, some colleges were making very good use of these as an effective means of identifying additional support needs for individual students.

One college has a strong key skills agenda driven by the senior management team. The college highlights key skills as an essential element in its 16 to 19 strategy and part of its strong commitment to widening participation. It focuses on integrating key skills with the delivery of students' main areas of study. There is a cross-college key skills timetable and an annual schedule for monitoring, reviewing and reporting on students' key skills achievements. While there is demonstrable improvement in the key skills achievements for students following vocational courses, this strategy is proving to be less successful for students following GCE A level programmes.

Independent study arrangements

29. Colleges in the sample do not generally make effective arrangements to enable students to study on their own while attending the centre. In several colleges, gaps in students' timetables during the day are not used positively, either because the setting lacks available and appropriate space for study or because the students lack skills to study independently. Although students in the sixth form centres generally have good access to IT, including on an open-access basis, space is often at a premium and students report that conditions are not conducive to successful private study while at college. In line with the FE sector as a whole, there is underdeveloped use of college intranet and VLE facilities for self-study purposes in most of the colleges visited. Despite this overall pattern, the survey did identify some examples of good practice:

At one college all students are contracted to participate in five hours of private study during the week. The students have to complete a monitoring sheet, which is signed off by the staff in the learning resource centre to explain when they have been working on private study and what they have been doing. The monitoring sheet is then reviewed during tutorials.

In another college there is a dedicated learning centre for sixth form centre students. Much effort has gone into increasing the support arrangements available through the centre. These include a range of study support guides on how to write and present essays and assignments and an assignment tracker to enable students to monitor how well they are doing. Students who fall behind with work gain access to additional work on the college's intranet.

Achievement and progression

30. Given the considerable variation in the nature of sixth form centre provision it is not easy to make generalisations and comparisons in terms of students' achievements between colleges that organise their provision in this way and those that do not. Based on data that are available, however, there is no overall indication that performance in sixth form centres is demonstrably better or worse than in colleges that do not organise their 16 to 19 provision in this way.

31. The most direct line of comparison lies with GCE A level provision, which forms the core provision in the majority of sixth form centres. By this measure, analysis of college performance reports and inspection evidence indicates that the majority of the sample colleges are performing at around the national average for GFE and tertiary colleges in terms of both retention and pass rates. Three colleges in the sample had improved to above the national average in terms of retention and a further three in terms of overall 16 to 19 achievement. Just under half of the colleges had retention and pass rates at or around the national average and a further five were below. In general terms, therefore, this evidence would suggest that the pattern of achievement, at least in terms of GCE A level, is no better or worse than in colleges with non-focused provision.

32. Despite the overall neutrality of these findings, there is some evidence to suggest that certain characteristics of sixth form centre provision may at least form significant contributory factors in an overall pattern of improving retention and achievement for 16- to 19-year-old students exhibited in the majority of colleges. While it is not possible to establish a direct correlation, those colleges with improving patterns of retention and achievement were able to highlight particular features of their sixth form centre provision which they saw as important elements contributing to improving achievement. These included: the significant emphasis given to student support and in particular tutorial provision within the centres; extended mentoring arrangements; a core of staff teaching 16- to 19-year-old students; a focus on improving teaching and learning; and, most importantly, the emphasis given to careful and thorough pre-entry advice and guidance.

One college attributes an upward trend in achievements in most subjects in the sixth form centre over a three-year period to an increased focus on pre-entry guidance and support. All students (whether first or second year) are given a second interview

on arriving at or returning to college to ensure that they are on the right programme and are happy with their support arrangements. Students felt that this was particularly useful in re-focusing their reasons for being on the course. This tightening up of enrolment procedures also enables the college to identify 'at risk' students at an early stage.

In a sixth form centre where retention and pass rates were declining, the college's self-assessment had identified key weaknesses in the arrangements for student support, including tutorial provision, target-setting and inconsistencies in the quality of teaching.

Value-added analysis

33. Nearly all of the colleges included in the sample made at least some use of value-added analysis both in reporting and reviewing the achievements of students in the sixth form centre, setting targets for individual student performance and in judging the overall quality of provision. As is the case in most FE colleges, use of value-added analysis was most pronounced in colleges with predominantly GCE A level provision. Most of the sample colleges subscribed to one of the national systems for measuring value added although for some colleges this was a very recent development. In a similar way to the post-16 sector as a whole, the extent to which extensive and systematic use is made of these data was very variable across the sample colleges. In the best examples, value-added performance is monitored down to subject level and then reported to the senior management team; in some cases, value-added scores at subject level are used as part of the performance management for teachers.

One college has devised its own value-added system which is managed by a value-added co-ordinator who works across the college's two sixth form centres. The system provides a predicted grade for each subject studied and divides anticipated grades into 'high', 'middle' and 'low' categories. Arrangements for explaining the system to students, staff and parents are good. Students' progress against targets is monitored in a series of reviews throughout the year. Comprehensive data are available showing each student's value-added score in each subject. More students exceed their expected score than fall short of it.

Another college has devised a value-added system based on the DfES model. Students calculate their minimum target grades for each subject and these are compared with performance grades produced by teachers at termly reviews. They also feature in twice-yearly reports and at parents' evenings. In 2003, two thirds of students achieved significant value-added in their GCE A levels according to this system.

Teaching and learning

34. There is little evidence to suggest that colleges with sixth form centres seek to develop a distinctive approach to teaching and learning for students aged 16 to 19 or that the quality of teaching and learning is demonstratively better than is found in the post-16 sector as a whole.

35. Evidence from inspection reports indicates that the quality of most teaching and learning for 16 to 19 year olds in the sample colleges is at least satisfactory and much of it is good. In overall terms, these colleges perform at around the average for GFE and tertiary colleges. These overall figures, of course, are likely to include some provision for 16 to 19 year olds which does not take place within the sixth form centre. A better comparison can be made through the teaching of GCE A level to 16- to 19-year-old students only since this forms the predominant area of provision in most of the colleges. In this case, the evidence again indicates that the sample colleges are very similar to the overall pattern for colleges found in Ofsted inspections. The percentage of good or better GCE AS and A2 lessons for 16- to 19-year-old students observed during inspections at the sample college varied from 56.5% to 63%.

36. Analysis of curriculum-level inspection reports and the sample colleges' own self-assessment reports suggest that teaching in the sixth form centres is generally characterised by competent, well-planned and well-managed lessons, but few that are outstanding or exemplary. Assessment procedures are generally at least satisfactory. Most teachers regularly set work and marking is thorough and helpful. There are appropriate and thorough assessment policies in place and good co-ordination of arrangements for internal verification in most colleges. In all of these respects, the sample colleges exhibit similar characteristics to the FE sector as a whole.

37. Students are generally positive about the teaching and learning they experience in sixth form centres. They value their relationships with teachers and the extent to which they are treated as adults and expected to take responsibility for their own learning. Where students did make criticisms these tended to be about the lack of variety in teaching methods used in some subjects, particularly where this prevents them from taking an active part in lessons.

38. One identified area for development, frequently picked up in college self-assessment reports as well as inspection evidence, is the lack of developed use of Information Learning Technology (ILT) in lessons and the, at best, only embryonic use of the intranet/VLE as a structured learning tool. A further weakness identified in several college self-assessment reports and in discussions with students points to colleges' general inability to understand the need for and effectively support teaching styles which meet the needs of individual learners.

39. There is very little evidence of colleges seeking to develop or identify a distinctive approach to teaching and learning within the sixth form centre, for example in contrast to that applied to the teaching of adult students. In fact, staff in several colleges emphasised the fact that they viewed good teaching and learning as being universally applicable. A few colleges have spent time developing individual learning plans and analysing students' styles of learning but none could demonstrate any discernable improvement in teaching and learning as a result of these initiatives. There are very few examples of good practice being shared within or outside the sixth form centres.

One college has developed a 'whole-college' approach to teaching and learning and has not deliberately or significantly altered the approach to teaching and learning in its sixth form centre. However, it has targeted staff development within the centre

towards providing staff with training on dealing with challenging behaviour, classroom management and strategies for improving student motivation.

A college in the north east has focused on improving teaching and learning for 16- to 18-year-old students and has undertaken a significant amount of training and development aimed at supporting individual learner needs in the classroom and in the development of accelerated learning techniques. Small whiteboards have been introduced into every classroom to enable teachers to leave lesson objectives displayed throughout the lesson and review them at the end.

Resources

40. In line with the FE sector as a whole, the sixth form centres located in the sample colleges are characterised by well-qualified and experienced staff, the majority of whom are teacher-trained. In several cases, colleges have deliberately sought to employ teachers who have had previous experience in school sixth forms or in sixth form colleges. Most teachers tend to work almost exclusively within the sixth form centre although in many colleges the centre also relies on servicing arrangements with staff from other parts of the college.

41. The quality of accommodation available in sixth form centres is variable. Four of the colleges in the sample have excellent purpose-built centres with a high degree of physical separation from other parts of the college, while a few of the sample colleges operate from cramped and sometimes poor-quality buildings. One large college in the north west has established several centres on local schools' premises in addition to its own sixth form centre on one of the college's campuses. In other colleges, the sixth form centre is located within a multi-purpose building and several resources are shared with students from other parts of the college. In general, the success of the centres, in terms of continued growth of student numbers has led to considerable pressure on space. Access to the teaching accommodation for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is generally good in all of the sample colleges.

42. Library and learning resources are generally of good quality in all of the sample colleges. The majority have at least some learning resources dedicated to students attending the sixth form centre although, in other cases, facilities are shared with other parts of the college. Students typically have access to modern ICT facilities and a wide range of suitable learning resources. A few centres lack access to specialist facilities, such as performing arts and sports and leisure facilities. Access to student common rooms and student services areas are also very variable. Some sixth form centres have no common room facilities and the effectiveness of open access learning centres are constrained by the tendency for them to be used as social meeting centres. Some colleges' private study areas are too small to cope with the demand.

One sixth form centre is located in a large building close to the town centre. It has its own reception area and a student common room. The learning resource centre is located in another building a few minutes' walk away. Classrooms are generally well furnished and in good order, although the narrow width of many of them, coupled

with large class sizes, places some restrictions on the teaching and learning activities that can be used.

Another college has located its sixth form centre in rooms on the third floor of a tower block; it contains classrooms, laboratories, a learning resource centre and a common room. Students have very good access to specialist equipment and other learning resources. There is an excellent library and learning resource centre located within the centre.

In a newly built sixth form centre, the majority of classrooms have LCD projectors networked and with internet access. The centre is also piloting some new technologies including quiz kits and interactive whiteboards.

Support and guidance

43. The good quality of student support and guidance is a strong characteristic of most colleges and the colleges in the survey were no exception. Although not wholly dissimilar from the pattern of support arrangements that exist for 16- to 19-year-old students in colleges where provision is not 'focused', there are, nevertheless, certain aspects of provision which are given particular prominence within sixth form centres.

44. Initial advice and guidance arrangements are particularly good and reflect the general strengths in this area reported in Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools' Annual Report 2002/03 for all colleges. The majority of sixth form centres have developed close relationships with local schools, and there are often strong and productive links with a group of 'feeder' schools. All of the sample colleges produce attractive and informative prospectuses and publicity materials aimed specifically at 16- to 19-year-old students; they seek to accentuate the distinctiveness of provision at the sixth form centre and to give prospective students a very clear idea of what student life is like there. Information is often well presented on college websites, which again clearly separate provision for 16 to 19 year olds from that aimed at adult students.

45. Staff from the sixth form centres frequently make presentations and attend course choice events in school, and in several cases initial interviews are held on school premises. A particular emphasis is given to arranging open days and 'taster' events within the sixth form centre itself and care is taken in ensuring that students start off on the right programme. Some colleges cited evidence of their successful support for students in terms of high patterns of retention at subject level and few changes of course choice during the first term of study. Students spoken to during the survey reported that the general level of information and advice received prior to starting their studies was of very good quality.

Students in one sixth form centre commented that the pre-entry advice they received was excellent. They were appreciative of the time spent with them at interview to ensure that they were choosing the right courses for their intended future career. The transition of students is a very important feature of support in the college and there are two aspects that the college uses to make this successful. When pupils from the local schools are in year 11 they attend college for a day and participate in activities. When they are enrolled and inducted in the college they take part in a 'year in a

week' activity, which is a variety of tasters of the different subjects that they have chosen. This helps to ensure that they are happy with their chosen combination of subjects.

One sixth form centre has appointed a marketing manager who is involved in setting up and advertising 'taster days' and open days and works with schools to raise the awareness of opportunities at the sixth form centre. Pre-entry guidance and enrolment has been an aspect that the centre has actively addressed over the last two years in response to retention issues. Students are given initial guidance to determine their level and subject preference and are then offered an interview. Interview guides are posted to all applicants prior to their interview. Interview procedures have been standardised with a list of prompt sheets for tutors. Students are also given feedback on their performance at interview. Before students start their course in September they are given a second interview to ensure that they are enrolled on the right programme.

Sixth form centre students in another college have an initial interview, a taster day and a final results interview. Their three-day induction with their personal tutor also includes time with subject specialists from their chosen courses. Four weeks into term, students have a 'change and drop' afternoon, where permission can be sought to change or drop a course or subject.

46. Colleges tend to have extensive and well-developed arrangements for supporting students once they join their sixth form centres. Induction programmes are comprehensive and generally well planned. Some centres have developed detailed policies covering student attendance and punctuality and enforce them effectively. Colleges recognise one of the advantages of separate 16 to 19 provision as being the extent to which they can apply such rules universally without having to compromise them to fit the different circumstances of many adult students. There is a particularly strong emphasis on monitoring attendance and punctuality in all of the sample colleges, often backed up by detailed policies. In some colleges, attendance officers are based in the sixth form centre to assist with these tasks. Despite these arrangements, however, not all colleges have achieved success in raising attendance and punctuality to their own target levels.

Staff in one sixth form centre were very clear about the focus of their retention and achievement strategies. A thorough and well-organised initial assessment process, including detailed learning plans negotiated with students, is the essence of support for students and links effectively to the tutorial system. The college also employs retention officers and peer mentors who play a crucial support role, especially when students first arrive at college.

One college has devised a policy on punctuality for its sixth form centre in response to a weakness identified during inspection. The policy covers issues relating to negotiated lateness and rare instances of lateness, but is written in the form of guidelines rather than specific procedures. The college's attendance officers produce weekly punctuality and attendance reports for personal tutors.

Another college has an effective college absence call system, which is monitored by student achievement officers. This results in both reports and telephone calls on a daily basis to parents. The college also undertakes a punctuality audit, which

identifies persistently late students for referral to the college's disciplinary procedures.

47. There are generally good arrangements for identifying students' additional support needs, although the take-up of additional learning support by students in a few colleges is low. All of the sample colleges have effective arrangements for supporting students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Some colleges make very effective use of diagnostic programmes designed to identify students' key skills requirements as a means of identifying the additional learning support needs of individual students. Very few colleges, however, make effective use of these findings to identify targets in students' individual learning plans.

48. Provision of additional learning support takes a variety of forms across the sample of colleges, including in-class support, workshops and drop-in facilities. A particularly effective arrangement made in several colleges is the use of subject-specific workshops to provide students with opportunities to catch up with work if they are falling behind and to enhance their learning in particular subjects. In a few colleges, extensive use is made of learning mentors who provide students with one-to-one support to improve study skills, self-esteem and social awareness. Students in all of the sample colleges valued greatly the individual support they received from staff.

49. Tutorial provision is another very prominent feature of support arrangements in sixth form centres. In line with provision for 16- to 19-year-old students in all colleges, students are allocated a personal tutor and are expected to attend at least one weekly timetabled tutorial. Some sample colleges have mirrored their arrangements in many sixth form colleges and have adopted a senior tutor system with an identified pastoral team. Tutorial systems are often used effectively to monitor students' progress, for example by making use of well-developed minimum target grade systems which measure students' actual performance against that predicted by their previous attainment at GCSE. There is a strong emphasis on regular reporting of students' progress both to themselves and to parents and guardians. Parents' evenings also form a prominent part of the ethos of the sixth form centres.

In one sixth form centre each student has a group tutor and a monitoring and action planning (MAP) folder which helps them to focus on their own key targets and priorities. Great emphasis is placed on continuously reviewing progress against targets and self-evaluation of the process. Activities include monitoring progress against long- and short-term goals and planning for life after college. The documentation is comprehensive and there is good record-keeping.

50. Colleges generally have good arrangements for supporting students as they progress from year 1 to year 2 of their GCE A level programmes. Typical arrangements include the use of progression interviews at the end of the first year of GCE AS courses and a stipulation of minimum requirements in AS achievement in order to move on to A2.

51. Considerable emphasis is given to careers advice and guidance in the sixth form centres. All colleges in the sample provide some form of dedicated careers advice and guidance resources for students aged 16 to 19 and in a few cases have gained

external awards for the quality of their careers education and guidance service. There are generally good links with Connexions personal advisors. Resources include well-stocked up-to-date reference materials and CD-ROM and specialist careers software. Support for students seeking entry to higher education (HE) are particularly strong. Several colleges have established productive relationships with particular universities and use these links well to enhance students' understanding of the experience of studying in HE. In a minority of colleges, programmes of support for gifted and talented students were provided, sometimes as part of the Aim Higher initiative.

Leadership and management

Management arrangements

52. Colleges generally have clear management arrangements for their focused 16 to 19 provision. The majority have a head of centre, usually a member of the senior management team, who takes strategic responsibility for provision within the sixth form centre and heads up an operational team which may include support and guidance as well as curriculum teams. Typically, the management model follows that often found in sixth form colleges, with middle managers responsible for curriculum and quality assurance and pastoral arrangements within the centre, and a number of curriculum co-ordinators. The head of centre may have additional responsibilities for other, non-focused, provision that operates from a particular college base.

53. Colleges in the sample cited several strengths in the managerial arrangements for their sixth form centres. These included the existence of a 'focused' core team of staff who could place more emphasis on raising standards and improving the experiences of students aged 16 to 19 and who had the ability to establish clearer identities for students of different ages. Managers also found it easier to provide students with a sense of belonging to a particular, and often smaller, centre and, in the case of GCE A level students, more of the collective sense which vocational students can get from following the same timetable. More generally, links with schools were seen to be easier to manage and had grown stronger since the centre was established. Curriculum co-ordination was also seen to be stronger with an enhanced focus on linking this to support for students. Managers also claimed to have achieved a greater consistency of operation and a better focus on performance and quality assurance and on monitoring student performance and progression. Some colleges also found it easier to target their resources. Many centres have a discrete budget allocated to them, especially for curriculum resource provision.

One college had reorganised its provision in order to establish clearer identities for the college's provision for students of different ages. Their management approach is modelled on what they identify as successful practice in sixth form centres. The inspection report for this college commented positively on the success of these changes but also noted that the complexities of managing curriculum areas across what have now become two distinct colleges through separate management teams had not been fully resolved.

One college has a director of curriculum for its sixth form centre and four operational managers. The latter have no teaching duties and focus on the management and co-ordination of curriculum areas; they take direct responsibility for liaising with a number of local schools. Managers feel that the advantage of these arrangements is that there is a stronger emphasis given to curriculum development.

Another college identifies the strength of its separate sixth form centre management arrangements in terms of the availability of core staff, good dedicated resources, a clear inclusion policy and a sense of 'belonging' within the centre.

54. Despite their positive features, however, the management of separate sixth form centres also brings some difficulties and tensions. One of the chief difficulties arises when some subject areas and staff are located outside the centre but contribute significantly to it. Tensions can arise in relation to ensuring consistency of student support arrangements, curriculum planning and quality assurance arrangements. Staff report examples of conflicting demands and expectations from different management teams. College managers also report some additional costs through duplication of provision and operational difficulties posed by the lack of common timetabling arrangements across the college. In some colleges, the sixth form centre provision was perceived by some staff as too 'elitist' in its approach. In colleges with split sites, staff travel and communication between centres are also identified as difficulties.

One college noted in its self-assessment report that, 'the full introduction of all aspects of Curriculum 2000 continues to present some difficulties, in part because of the geographical separation of the sixth form centre and the vocational schools/centres which militates against students studying a mix of vocational and academic studies'.

In another college, tensions have arisen in the relationship between the sixth form centre and other faculties within the college. Not all managers appear to agree with the philosophy behind focused 16 to 19 provision and this has been an issue discussed within the senior management team. The head of centre reported a reluctance on the part of some staff servicing GCE A level courses to participate in the personal tutoring system, sixth form centre parents' evenings and guidance and enrolment events. The lack of common timetabling arrangements also causes problems.

One college, which provides mainly vocational courses within its sixth form centre, organises this as one of five 'schools' within the college. Some subjects taught within the sixth form centre are delivered by staff who are based in other 'schools'. The college acknowledges some tension in these relationships, in particular, the difficulty of establishing complete 'ownership' of the provision and in controlling and developing the curriculum.

In a college which operates sixth form centres based on school premises, model management agreements have been drawn up which set out a protocol for the arrangements between school and college staff. A joint governance group is expected to meet at least three times a year. There is a centre management team comprising school and college staff that meets formally once per term. Quality

assurance arrangements, setting out school and college responsibilities, are closely drawn up within the agreements.

Strategic developments – an overall direction for 16 to 19 education

55. Focused provision for 16- to 19-year-old students often figures strongly in the sample colleges' future planning. Most significantly, several colleges have begun to realign their provision in terms of a 14 to 19 focus. In general, the existence of already established 'focusing' within the college has helped to promote this process and enables the college to build productively on its existing links with schools, particularly in the context of Increased Flexibility Project (IFP) initiatives. However, in the majority of colleges there is little direct relationship between curriculum developments with schools in the 14 to 16 phase and the nature and organisation of provision in the sixth form centre. The former tends to be generally academic in its focus while the latter is overwhelmingly vocational and does not form part of the sixth form centre provision.

One college with a large sixth form centre avoids duplication of provision with local schools and uses extensive market research to try out new provision. For example, the increasing recruitment pattern for BTEC national diplomas has led to 11 new subjects being offered.

Curriculum provision

Quality assurance

56. All of the sample colleges have well-developed quality assurance systems enabling the focused provision to be evaluated as a whole and in detail. Typically, the sixth form centre provision is subject to a separate self-assessment report forming part of the college's overall self-assessment process. Other than this, however, the survey did not identify any particularly distinctive features of quality assurance arrangements in colleges which have focused provision in the form of sixth form centres. Self-assessment reports for centres are generally comprehensive and contain relevant action plans for improvement. Too often, however, the emphasis was placed upon procedures rather than outcomes and colleges had difficulty in demonstrating any definite improvements in standards as a result of the quality assurance arrangements. All colleges in the sample operated systems of internal lesson observations which were well integrated with the self-assessment process. Evidence from Ofsted inspections indicated that, as is the case with FE colleges in general, there was a tendency for internal observation grades to be over generous.

One college effectively monitors its provision predominantly through annual lesson observations of teachers and regular termly surveys of students' perceptions of their courses. Students extensively contribute to continuous improvement. There is a student council with representatives from across the college. Students are also represented on the Equality and Diversity Committee and ILT User Group within the college. Issues that are raised by students, either through surveys or from focus groups are fed back to them through tutorial arrangements or in the student diary.

Another college with a well-established sixth form centre has developed a set of 'descriptors' based on what it sees as the key principles of 'sixth form' provision. These include: a focus entirely on meeting the needs of students aged 16 to 19; an emphasis on enrichment; treating students as adults within a friendly and supportive environment that prepares them for progression to HE or the world of work; a well-structured pastoral care service, with high priority given to individualised pastoral support and an emphasis on partnership between staff, students and parents. The college has produced a grid covering these criteria against which it seeks to match its actual performance.

57. Most colleges placed a particular emphasis on providing staff development relevant to 16- to 19-year-old learners. This included a focus on aspects such as teaching and learning methodologies, learning styles and the management of student behaviour. Few, however, could provide any clear evidence of its impact on the quality of teaching and learning.

One college has established a 'teaching and learning unit' which consists of experienced teaching practitioners who work on projects aimed at improving consistency in teaching and learning across the college. One project focuses on the teaching of GCSE subjects within the sixth form centre.

Another college's sixth form centre has deliberately focused on improving all teaching and learning over the past three years. There are three staff INSET days per year dedicated to teaching and learning. This includes the development of schemes of work, the introduction of different teaching methodologies in the classroom and the use of reflective learning techniques. A recent development has been the expectation that all teachers will experiment with new forms of teaching and then report back at the next staff development session to evaluate its success. Teachers see these activities as highly beneficial and use them to discuss and exchange ideas and approaches to teaching.

Collaboration and liaison

58. There is considerable variation in the extent to which colleges with sixth form centres engage in collaborative work with local schools and colleges. This partly depends on the shape of provision within the locality, the extent to which other post-16 providers offer similar curricula and the nature of provision within the centre. In a few of the sample colleges, developments were at an early stage in terms of establishing greater collaborative links across the area. This was often part of a planned response to an Ofsted 16 to 19 area inspection, or as a general aspect of local LSC strategic planning. Some of the sample colleges are playing leading roles in local collaborative groupings, for example as part of a strategy to widen participation or in terms of plans to rationalise sixth form provision in an area. In a minority of colleges, some provision for 14- to 16-year-old students, usually within an IFP initiative, has been developed within the sixth form centre. At the other extreme, some sixth form centres continue to operate in highly competitive local environments in terms of post-16 provision and have very few formal links with local schools or colleges.

In one college, some joint work has been carried out with a neighbouring sixth form college and the local Learning Partnership to produce a joint course guidance booklet entitled 'Making the Right Choice'. The two colleges are also working together to develop 'fast track' and 'taster' courses for local schools.

One sixth form centre works with the local pupil referral unit (PRU). Six students attend the college for three days per week. Staff from the PRU teach them GCSE mathematics and English while college staff deliver ICT and key skills. The scheme is now in its second year and appears to be working well.

Cost-effectiveness

59. Colleges generally have good awareness of the relative costs of provision within their sixth form centres although there is variation in the extent to which these costs are formally separated and monitored. Not all colleges operate a minimum group size within the centre and are generally prepared to operate a system whereby some relatively small groups, for example in areas such as modern foreign languages, are subsidised by much larger group sizes elsewhere in the centre. Where a minimum group size ruling does operate, this tends to be around 12. Other measures taken to reduce costs include the merging of classes for GCE A2 subjects and a reduction in taught hours for small classes. In most colleges, careful attention is paid to

monitoring class size and enrolment patterns, achieving economies of scale where possible through careful staff deployment and allocation of teaching hours. Bearing in mind the high recruitment patterns in the majority of colleges sampled together with an overall pattern of good and often improving retention and achievement there is strong evidence to suggest that provision in sixth form centres as units within the college are likely to offer good value for money.

Annex 1. Colleges visited as part of the survey

Barnsley College

Bournville College of Further Education

Bury College

City and Islington College

City College Birmingham

Cornwall College

Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College

Harrow College

Hartlepool College of Further Education

Macclesfield College

Manchester College of Arts and Technology

North East Worcestershire College

St Helens College

Solihull College

Stanmore College

Sutton Coldfield College

Wigan and Leigh College