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Work-related learning: the story so far

Better education and care

Age groupPublPost-compulsoryJune

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Introduction

Enterprise education is seen as a key component in improving the economic well-being of the nation and individuals. Businesses need employees with a 'can do' attitude, a willingness to take on responsibility, a creative and innovative approach to solving problems, and the ability to cope with uncertainty and change and make reasonable risk/reward assessments; but these skills and attributes are equally important for individuals to be successful in their personal lives. The government has introduced a number of initiatives aimed at making learning more relevant, encouraging work-related learning, and building links between the education community and businesses: approximately 800 schools have piloted approaches to enterprise education, and 1000 schools have been supported by enterprise advisers.

Ofsted's reports into vocational learning, enterprise and further education reveals a great deal of variability in terms of quality and success in the way our children and young people are currently prepared for the world of work. This variability is confirmed by the findings of a poll commissioned by Ofsted among 20–30 year olds about how well education had prepared them for working life. Nearly half felt that education had not prepared them well for their first job. Ofsted's recent study on *Developing new vocational pathways at Key Stage 4* revealed a mixed picture in terms of the government's aim to make the curriculum more relevant to vocational learners. It found that while the new vocational GCSE courses are supporting the government's intentions to diversify the curriculum and make it more vocationally relevant to pupils, there is too much variability and, in spite of examples of high achievement in all subjects, the courses are largely restricted to low-attaining pupils in a significant minority of schools. The report also found that while the adult atmosphere in courses taught jointly with colleges and industrial training centres has helped to improve pupils' behaviour, few schools are adequately organised to make efficient use of business links, and the progression routes for post-16s are often unclear to both pupils and teachers.

In many cases, there is good work going on in schools, but there is insufficient 'joining up' between courses, schools and businesses, and learning and outcomes. Ofsted's review of *Learning to be enterprising at Key Stage 4* found that, encouragingly, pupils are motivated by enterprise learning and through it develop a good range of skills; however, insufficient attention is given to pupils' learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, understanding, skills and attributes, and courses are rarely planned as part of a coherent programme of vocational and work-related learning.

Recent developments in post-16 education – vocational A levels (AVCE) – have been aimed at developing a balanced diet for learners, one that will encourage more young people to continue in education and training beyond 16, as a contribution to meeting the skills gaps frequently identified by employers. However, Ofsted's review of *Vocational A levels – the first two years* suggests that these new qualifications have met with limited success. The report found that while most of the work seen was satisfactory or good, unsatisfactory teaching was more common in this area than in the 16 to 19 phase generally, and pass rates were lower than for GCE A and AS levels. The report concluded that the vocational A level is poorly designed: neither seriously vocational, nor consistently advanced; little use is made of work experience; and assessment is excessively complex and bureaucratic. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the new qualifications are unpopular with learners, and take-up is low. Indeed, our poll showed too that many young people felt that they would have been better prepared for the world of work by more work experience and vocational training, more practical lessons and better careers advice.

Ofsted has just completed the first cycle of inspection of all post-16 colleges. Further education (FE) colleges have a vital role to play in raising standards for 14 to 19 year olds, particularly in vocational education and work-related learning. Ofsted's reports into *Why FE colleges succeed/fail* and on *The responsiveness of colleges to the needs of employers* highlight strengths and weaknesses in further education, and point to areas for improvement in relationships with employers. In the next inspections, colleges found to be underperforming will be scrutinised in greater detail, including in this important part of their work.

The best colleges place the education and success of learners at the heart of what they do, and demonstrate a relentless drive for continuous improvement, while the less successful often focus too little on learners' outcomes, offer weak and unfocused support and fail to stimulate learners who have low levels of self-esteem.

Many colleges work closely with employers, but there is more to do; colleges are often commendably focused on developing the skills of their learners, but in meeting their demands often fail to meet the needs of employers. Colleges that are successful in working with employers give this work a high priority, but collaboration between colleges and employers is too variable, with the effect that often both employers and learners are the losers.

To help inform practice in England, Ofsted has carried out studies of similar provision in other countries. The report on *Pathways to parity 14–19* suggests that in some key aspects of vocational education there are lessons to be learned from Denmark, Netherlands and New South Wales, Australia, about parity of esteem, staying-on rates and the role of employers in developing and assessing qualifications. In these countries, vocational education focuses more specifically on the development of skills for particular types of employment, and courses provide clear pathways to higher education and employment and are held in high regard by both young people and the community. Staying-on rates into full-time education or training beyond the end of compulsory education are also higher, and employers are much more directly involved in determining the content and assessment of vocational courses. Significantly, teachers of vocational courses are normally required to have industrial experience.

There are certainly lessons to be learned from both UK and international approaches to vocational and enterprise learning if education is to meet the needs of learners and their future employers. Curriculum development, quality of teaching, links with the business community and encouraging learners to

achieve their goals are all areas that need attention. We hope that by highlighting the good as well as the not so good that this report will provide food for thought for the future.

Pathways to parity: a survey of 14–19 vocational provision in Denmark, Netherlands and New South Wales

This report examines the lessons that might be learned in England from a limited survey of vocational education and training for 14 to 19 year olds in Denmark, the Netherlands and New South Wales, Australia, all countries that are noted in different ways for their vocational provision. The report is largely based on background data and information supplied, but short visits were also made to each country during March 2003 to observe vocational education in schools and colleges and to discuss developments with government officers, senior managers in schools and colleges, teachers, students and employers. The focus of the visits was the context in which vocational education operates in each country and the different vocational pathways available to young people. The report includes detailed case studies of their vocational provision.

- Vocational education in the three countries focuses more specifically on the development of skills for particular types of employment than it does in England.
- Staying-on rates into full-time education or training beyond the end of compulsory education are higher than in England, and the end of compulsory education is less of a watershed. Employers are much more directly involved in determining the content and assessment of vocational courses than in England, and this helps to give the courses and associated qualifications currency and status. It also helps to ensure that vocational provision is more closely aligned to the needs of the economy than it is in England.
- Vocational courses are held in higher esteem by young people and others in the community than they are in England. This is mainly because they are seen as providing clear pathways to higher education and employment.
- Teachers of vocational courses are normally required to have industrial experience, which is regularly updated through industrial placements. This helps to ensure that teaching is firmly embedded in current commercial and industrial practice and that strong links are forged with employers.
- As in England, most young people undertake some work experience during their time in compulsory education. However, in these countries structured work placements are a much stronger feature of post-16 vocational courses than they are in England, which helps to keep the courses relevant and strengthens the applied vocational dimension of the courses.

- Vocational education is taught in good quality accommodation which reflects the working environment.
- Careers education and guidance are seen as a strong and integral part of vocational courses.

Caution is needed in directly comparing and contrasting provision in these three countries with England because of the fundamental differences in education policy and social factors. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in key aspects of vocational education there appear to be lessons that can be learned. In particular, there are important messages about the status of vocational courses and students' self-esteem, staying-on rates and the role of employers in developing and assessing qualifications.

Vocational A levels: the first two years

This report evaluates the quality and standards of the Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE) in a sample of sixth forms in schools, general further education (GFE) colleges and sixth form colleges (SFC). It covers the findings of a one-year survey by Ofsted of the AVCE following the introduction of the Curriculum 2000 reforms and the replacement of the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) advanced by the AVCE. As well as visiting colleges and schools during 2002/3, inspectors sought the views of employers and higher education institutions.

- Most of the work seen was satisfactory or good. Teaching, for example, was generally effective. However, the proportion of unsatisfactory teaching, at 13%, was much higher than in the 16 to 19 phase generally.
- Students were generally well supported at a personal level, though the provision of additional learning support was not always effectively targeted.
- Although pass rates for the AVCE were lower than for GCE A and AS levels, this reflected the generally lower prior attainment of the candidates, suggesting that standards had not been lowered. Where value-added data was available, it showed that students' achievements were broadly those predicted on the basis of their prior attainment, or a little better. Teachers were able to refer to candidates who would not, in their view, have achieved an advanced qualification had it not been for the AVCE.
- The AVCE is not a popular qualification with learners, and is doing little to achieve the objectives of Curriculum 2000. Take-up is low, and though the qualification is intended for a broader range of ability than GCE A level, the survey found evidence of colleges raising entry requirements in the belief that the AVCE was more demanding than the GNVQ Advanced it replaced. Few students broadened their curriculum by studying a combination of AVCE and GCE AS and A levels.
- The AVCE is not well designed. It is neither seriously vocational, nor consistently advanced. The aims of the AVCE are not clearly understood by many teachers and students. A good deal of the course work is trivial, while some of it is excessively demanding. In some subjects, course specifications lack vocational content and are therefore too similar to GCE A level. Little use is made of work experience, which, when well planned, can transform students' experience of a course.
- The teaching of the key skill of ICT is usually effective, but the survey found that numeracy and communication were poorly integrated into courses and generally unsuccessful.

 Teaching and learning are particularly constrained by the AVCE assessment requirements. Assessment is excessively complex, bureaucratic and hard to understand. Teachers spend too much of their time assessing, rather than teaching; students spend too much time completing assessments, rather than learning. As a result, it is often difficult to cover the whole content of the course, and the learning lacks depth, failing to develop understanding of the key overarching concepts.

In addition to action needed by teachers, schools, colleges and awarding bodies to improve provision, the report recommends that QCA should:

- review the specifications of AVCE courses to allow teachers to set more imaginative assignments
- ensure greater clarity about the standards needed for students to gain high grades
- increase the vocational skills components of most courses
- make work experience a mandatory course requirement
- harmonise the demands on students studying the first year of the AVCE course with those for students on GCE AS and A-level courses.

Developing new vocational pathways: final report on the introduction of new GCSEs

 In September 2002, eight new General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) courses in vocational subjects were introduced: applied art and design; applied business; engineering; health and social care; applied information and communication technology (ICT); leisure and tourism; manufacturing; and applied science. The new GCSEs were developed to capture the interest shown by many Key Stage 4 pupils in the world of work. This report covers the introduction of the new courses in schools during the period from September 2002 to April 2004.

- The new GCSE courses got off to a satisfactory start, with some high points and some low points. They are supporting the government's intentions to diversify the curriculum at Key Stage 4 and make it more vocationally relevant to pupils.
- Pupils' achievement was found to be satisfactory or better in three quarters of lessons, and the quality of teaching was satisfactory or better in nearly nine tenths of lessons. However, these figures were lower than the average for all GCSE subjects at Key Stage 4.
- Although there were examples of high achievement in all subjects, there were also considerable overall differences among them. In some schools where the target group for the new courses was mainly lower-attaining pupils, achievement was often unsatisfactory.
- In most schools and subjects, the level of difficulty of the new GCSEs was found to be similar to other more established GCSE courses.
- The relevance, practical activities, and the adult atmosphere in some courses taught jointly with colleges and industrial training centres contributed to improvements in pupils' behaviour.
- The new courses were highly regarded by the majority of pupils taking them and their parents. However, in a significant minority of schools, where the courses were largely restricted to low-attaining pupils, the courses did not have parity of esteem with other GCSEs.
- Most schools attempted to provide pupils on the new courses with relevant experience of industry, but the gap between the most and least effective was very wide. Few schools were adequately organised to make efficient use of business links, and many small and medium-sized businesses do not have the time or personnel to meet the demand from schools.

- Many pupils and their teachers were unclear about post-16 routes of progression from these new courses.
- Accommodation for the new courses varied widely. Some courses, run jointly with further education (FE) colleges or training centres, are able to provide very good vocationally oriented accommodation, but there is a limit to the extent to which schools can make use of this.

In addition to action needed in schools to address key issues, the report recommends that action at national level should:

- improve the clarity of course specifications
- give clear guidance to schools on the vocational experiences that they should provide for pupils which distinguish the new courses from general courses
- develop a coherent national infrastructure to help schools and businesses form productive partnerships that will support delivery of the courses
- provide sufficient teachers with appropriate vocational qualifications and experience to teach the courses
- develop guidance for the design of specialist accommodation for the teaching of the courses.

Learning to be enterprising: an evaluation of enterprise learning at Key Stage 4

The government is keen to promote an enterprise culture within education. In 2001 it asked Sir Howard Davies, then chairman of the Financial Services Authority, to conduct a review of enterprise and the economy in education. The government broadly accepted the recommendations made in the review, which included the proposal to fund the equivalent of five days' enterprise learning for all pupils at Key Stage 4 from 2005. In preparation for this, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) established 151 pathfinder projects, embracing nearly 400 schools. Starting in September 2003, their role was to pilot possible approaches to developing enterprise learning at Key Stage 4. Ofsted was asked to evaluate enterprise learning in a sample of schools and identify examples of good practice to help inform future developments. This report summarises the findings.

Inspectors visited 33 secondary schools, including one special school, during the autumn term 2003 and spring term 2004. Of these, 27 schools were enterprise pathfinders, including 16 schools which were also designated as specialist business and enterprise schools. Many of the schools visited in the autumn of 2003 were at an early stage in developing enterprise learning and it was not always possible to observe such learning taking place during the visits. Inspectors therefore needed to rely on discussions with pupils and teachers when judging the quality of provision.

- Although many schools were at a relatively early stage of development, examples of good practice were observed in the majority of schools. In the most effective schools, there was evidence of pupils being motivated by enterprise learning and developing a good range of relevant skills.
- Schools making the most effective provision had a strong commitment from senior managers and a clear management structure to support enterprise learning. An enterprise ethos permeated teaching and learning across the curriculum. Schools made good use of local businesses and the wider community to engage pupils in real issues and to support enterprise learning more generally.
- In the most effective schools, teaching and learning were characterised by clearly defined aims and objectives, pupils taking responsibility for their own actions and being given significant autonomy to tackle relevant problems. Enterprise learning also involved pupils evaluating the outcomes of their decisions and reflecting on what they had learned. The least effective schools failed to recognise that enterprise education had important implications for teaching and learning styles.

- There was no 'blueprint' for the development of enterprise learning. Schools adopted a variety of different curriculum models, each of which had merits as well as shortcomings.
- Only half of the schools had an explicit and commonly understood definition of enterprise learning. This was impeding progress.
- Only a minority of schools identified desired learning outcomes in terms of pupils' enterprise knowledge, understanding, skills and attributes. Very few schools had effective procedures in place to assess and evaluate pupils' enterprise learning, although the use of logbooks for selfassessment and some pilot frameworks for assessment are emerging. Links to existing vocational qualifications were rare and few pupils were able to make direct use of their enterprise experiences in assessed coursework.
- Monitoring and evaluating progress in the implementation of plans for enterprise learning were weaknesses in a substantial proportion of schools.
- Although schools often provided a good range of enterprise experiences of high quality, these were rarely planned as part of a coherent curriculum for work-related learning.
- The cost-effectiveness of different possible uses of additional resources for developing enterprise learning has not been established.

In addition to action needed by schools to address key issues identified above, the report recommends that:

- The QCA should give greater recognition to enterprise learning in vocational qualifications and make it easier for pupils to make direct use of their enterprise experiences in assessed coursework.
- The DfES should use the experience gained from the pathfinder schools to compare the cost-effectiveness of different possible uses of the extra resources that will be made available to schools in order to recommend the best approaches to developing enterprise learning in the future.

The responsiveness of colleges to the needs of employers

In July 2003, the government published a White Paper, *21st Century Skills, Realising Our Potential,* which set out a national skills strategy. The strategy aims to ensure that employers have a workforce with the appropriate skills to support the success of their businesses and that individuals have the skills they need to be both employable and personally fulfilled.

The objectives of this survey were to inform the development of policy by reporting on how effectively colleges currently identify and respond to the needs of employers and to highlight instances and characteristics of best practice. In particular, inspectors sought to ascertain how, and to what effect, colleges are:

- identifying employers' needs
- reconfiguring their provision to meet these needs
- developing a curriculum in response to employers' requirements
- promoting the employment prospects and employability of their full-time students
- planning for and managing this activity.

The survey was informed by desk research and visits to 47 colleges of which 11 were sixth form colleges (SFC), 34 were general further education colleges (GFE) and two were land-based colleges. The report includes case studies that identify current best practice in the sector.

- Half the GFE colleges surveyed undertake a significant amount of work with and for employers. In most cases, this was relevant and appropriate.
- About 15% of the colleges surveyed do very little work in this area.
- Sixth form colleges rarely work directly with employers, although the new development-planning requirements introduced for the whole sector are resulting in all colleges, including SFC's, reassessing their provision for work with employers.
- GFE colleges, in particular, offer an extensive range of vocational courses, which generally provide a satisfactory match to the needs of employers in their local area. For their full-time courses this may be largely by chance rather than design, since colleges respond primarily to learner demand, which is not always closely aligned with employer need. Nevertheless, a large and growing number of learners are enrolled on

vocational courses in further education colleges, whether at the behest of their employers or to enhance their current or future employability.

• Most colleges surveyed aim to develop skills that will enhance the employability of their full-time learners.

Where work with employers is effective, it has been developed from extensive assessment of need by the college, with provision carefully tailored to meet employers' specific requirements. Those colleges that undertake significant work with employers are managing to overcome the considerable barriers to flexibility caused by both institutional structures and by the bureaucracy associated with resourcing such activity. Aspects of the FE sector's infrastructure, such as the funding methodology and the qualifications framework, are often a hindrance to the development of this work.

Where colleges are particularly successful in their work with employers they operate within a strategic framework that prioritises this work and adopts a whole-college approach to furthering it. Such colleges are currently in the minority, however. Even in those colleges that are actively engaged in employer training, an overarching strategy, including targets, quality assurance and staff development, which has a positive impact on the college itself as well as on external clients in specific curriculum areas, is largely absent. Although some colleges are setting precise and demanding targets, the majority are unable to do so, since few have a comprehensive system for collecting data about the volume of their current activity. Nor are there as yet agreed national measures against which they can judge their effectiveness. Quality assurance of both employer-related work and of the development of skills to enhance employability generally lacks rigorous analysis and evaluation.

Although recent government and Learning and Skills Council (LSC) policy initiatives have increased the attention being given to working with employers, and although the good practice identified in this report indicates that effective work is already in place, action is needed to ensure that there is consistency in the range and quality of provision for employers and individual learners alike.

Why colleges succeed

This report explores the reasons for the success of those colleges judged at inspection to be of outstanding quality, characterised by the provision of excellent education and training for their learners and exceptionally good leadership and management. Examples are taken from published reports of the colleges included in the sample.

The featured colleges were drawn from those inspected in the period from the summer term 2001 to the summer term 2004. Of the 29 colleges, 17 were sixth form colleges (SFCs), nine were general further education (GFE) or tertiary colleges and three were specialist colleges, including an independent specialist college for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. These 29 colleges represented 8% of the colleges inspected during the period in question.

They had in common the following key features:

- very good retention and pass rates
- highly effective teaching
- extremely successful learning
- excellent support and guidance for students at all stages in their programme
- an exemplary response to educational and social inclusion
- outstanding strategic leadership and governance
- consistently good curriculum management
- rigorous quality assurance processes, including accurate self-assessment, a detailed and regular focus on classroom practice and effective performance management of staff.

All colleges in the sample were judged to have outstandingly good leadership and management. In all cases, the quality of teaching and learning were well above the benchmarks for the type of institution in question; in the college with the best teaching grades, 91% of teaching was good or better and no teaching was less than satisfactory. In all cases, financial management was excellent, as was their value for money.

The reasons for the success of these 29 colleges were, despite their different roles and locations, very similar. All had a clear understanding of the particular nature of their mission and pursued its realisation single-mindedly. They were equally divided between the north and south and were not restricted to affluent areas: three were in Merseyside, four in Greater Manchester, one in Tyne and Wear, one in Tees Valley, one in inner London and two in Luton. However, most of them were sixth form colleges, and it may be that their size and, in most instances, the relative narrowness of their range of provision made it easier for them to perform well. In addition, students enrolling at these colleges generally have higher levels of prior attainment than those in GFE or tertiary

colleges. Nevertheless, the fact that some GFE colleges, albeit a small number, were among this high performing group suggests that success is not simply about size, mission and student ability. The attributes of a high performing college are not incompatible with institutions that are large and complex; it might just be more difficult to achieve exceptionally good quality in these institutions.

What singles out all these colleges is a realisation by their leaders that the central purpose is to place the education and success of their learners at the heart of what they do. Self-evident as this may seem, less effective colleges can often give the impression of being organised primarily around the needs and sensibilities of staff rather than learners. No such confusion exists within these colleges. On the contrary, there is a clear and well-understood consensus that all aspects of the institution must be equally effective in contributing to the success of every learner. There can be no weak links, but simply a relentless drive for continuous improvement and a great deal of sharply focused and dedicated work. Moreover, very many of these colleges have an exemplary response to educational and social inclusion, understanding that equality and equity are not about empty rhetoric and glossy policy documents, but about practical action which results in success for their learners.

Why colleges fail

This report explores the reasons why some colleges are judged at inspection to provide an inadequate experience of education and training for their learners and, in those cases where improvement has been recorded, to ascertain what is now contributing to this improvement. Throughout the report, illustrations are taken from published reports of the colleges included in the sample.

The colleges featured were drawn from those inspected in the period from the summer term of 2001 to the summer term of 2004. It comprised a total of 37 general further education (GFE), tertiary and specialist colleges (excluding independent specialist colleges), representing 12% of the 307 colleges inspected in the period. There were no sixth form colleges in the inadequate category. Eight independent specialist colleges (exclusively for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities) were judged to be inadequate, representing 19% of the 42 such colleges inspected.

Twelve of the colleges judged to be inadequate were re-inspected two years after the original judgement, and all but one found to be providing adequate education and training for their learners. Two mainstream colleges were closed following their original inspections and their work taken on by neighbouring institutions. One independent specialist college was closed recently.

The colleges chosen had in common the following key features:

- low retention and pass rates
- unsatisfactory teaching, particularly for 16 to 18 year olds
- inappropriate support and guidance for students
- weak strategic leadership
- inconsistent curriculum management
- inadequate management information systems, with data not used to inform strategy and practice
- ineffective quality assurance processes, with superficial and overoptimistic self-assessment, insufficient focus on classroom practice and poor performance management of staff.

Most of the colleges had experienced some level of financial difficulty, at worst as a result of poor stewardship, at best through a miscalculation of recruitment targets. Where financial problems were serious, it was often when managers' attention was diverted from the institution's central purpose.

The large majority of inadequate colleges were GFE colleges: 18% of all colleges in the area to the south of Birmingham were inadequate, whereas only 5% were inadequate in the north. Almost all the colleges in the southern half of the country were in local authority areas where there is intense competition amongst post-16 providers and where the GFE college is often the institution of 'last resort', particularly for school leavers. Also, most GFE colleges' intakes are non-selective.

A common feature of many of the colleges was a poorly focused educational mission. Most had responded with alacrity to the exhortation to widen participation without understanding that under-represented groups deserve better than to be enticed back into education to fail again. The general inability of such colleges to focus primarily on outcomes for learners as opposed to processes and procedures has poorly served many young people and adults returning to education. Few have understood and developed a curriculum portfolio that fills a distinct market niche. Staff morale in these institutions is often low.

These colleges are dealing with young people whose educational successes to date have been minimal. However, almost without exception, inadequate colleges have few teaching staff able to respond effectively to the particular needs of these young people. Many have unfocused and inappropriate support for students whose specific learning needs they fail to identify accurately. In the southern half of the country there are also issues about the recruitment of suitable staff.

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