

A cut above

Customising a curriculum
for excellence in
skills development

Maria Hughes
Barry Smeaton
Graeme Hall

**research
report**

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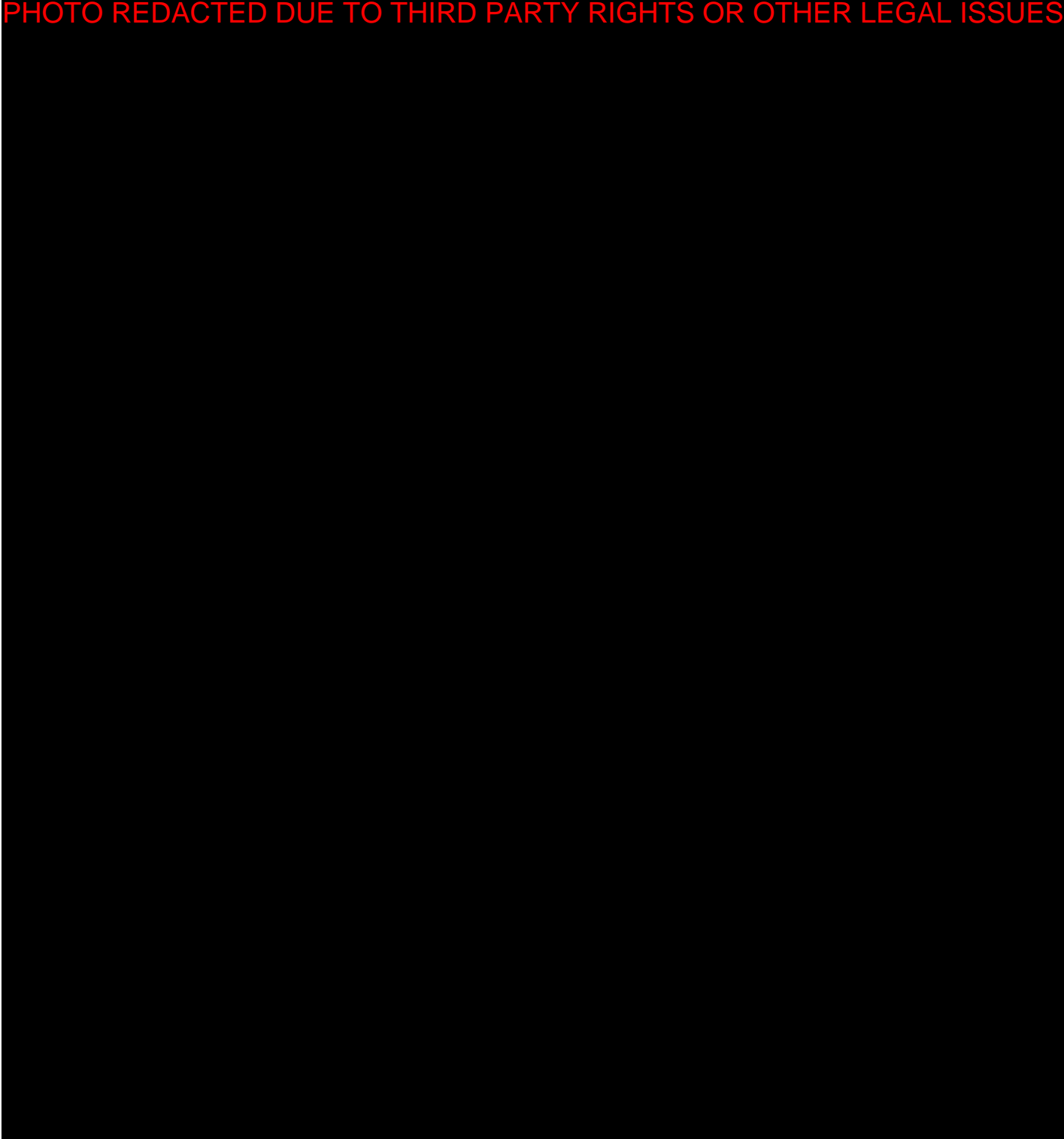
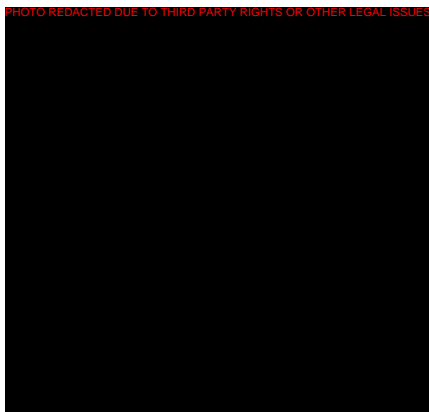


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Learners on the LSDA/
UKSkills project shown
preparing and being
assessed on their
competition dishes.

UK•SKILLS



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- Northumberland College
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1 Summary

Introduction

This report results from research undertaken by UK Skills and LSDA into the development of a curriculum for excellence.

Principles for a curriculum for excellence

It is possible to develop a curriculum for excellence with modest resources if teachers are sufficiently committed and flexible. The following principles underpin the development of a curriculum for excellence.

The role of teachers

- Good teachers make a difference! Their skills, knowledge, commitment and expertise are the most important resource in a curriculum for excellence.
- Teachers need to be encouraged to think creatively about the methods they use and the relationship of these to the needs of the learners, the skills that need to be developed and the anticipated learning outcome.
- Careful planning, preparation of the teaching activities and detailed briefing of the learners ensure that curriculum enhancements are integrated effectively into learning programmes.

Planning and implementing the curriculum

- Implementing a curriculum to support excellence does not call for rocket science and need not cost the earth.
- Teachers and learners need to have high expectations of the standards they can achieve. Higher standards of achievement bring higher degrees of satisfaction and self-confidence.
- Learners need to be actively involved in planning and implementing an enhanced curriculum – such as setting goals, organising aspects of learning and taking responsibility for all aspects of their learning.

Experiencing excellence

- Reinforcement of the value of excellence in skills development needs also to come from the learners' peer group.
- Learners need to have opportunities to experience excellence, to look beyond the standards they experience in their everyday lives and to develop their skills through example, practice and constructive feedback.
- Using experts from the world of work adds credibility and authenticity to the learning experience and provides examples of what constitutes excellence.
- Competitions provide experience of working under pressure and within set constraints. Maximising this experience depends on effective feedback and debriefing on performance.

Relationships

- A mature relationship between teacher and learner, more akin to that of expert and novice, often underpins the development of excellence.
- Good relationships with external enthusiasts, who can be enlisted as ‘natural supporters’ for the project, will also support the development of excellence. Sharing emerging expertise can accelerate its development.

Flexibility

- Keep the purpose of learning outcomes and the development of the learner at the forefront at all times. If existing aims and learning strategies are not working, be prepared to adapt them.
- When depending on external support for curriculum enhancements there will be things that fall outside the control of the college or provider. Contingency plans should be considered to ensure that learning outcomes can be achieved.

Resources

- Time is the most precious resource in the development of a curriculum for excellence. Providers need to think carefully about how they use the time of lecturers and learners to ensure that decisions about its allocations are based on relevant learning outcomes.
- There is no single optimum point for the introduction of a curriculum for excellence – different types of activities can be introduced at various points in the learning programme. However, forward planning can ensure the best use of resources and a better link between learning and performance.
- While extra funding can help, a great deal can be done within existing resources by adapting and reorientating existing curricula and teaching methods.

Incentives

- Incentives other than the NVQ are needed to encourage the support of excellence as a routine undertaking within vocational learning.

Guidelines for teachers

Teachers intending to implement a curriculum for excellence may find the following guidelines useful.

- **Recognise the learners' strengths and weaknesses:**
identifying the particular skills that need development supports the design of appropriate strategies.
- **Set specific aims and goals to address the weaknesses:**
focusing a specific activity on specific weaknesses can improve performance.
- **Brief the learners and encourage their 'ownership' of the work:**
explaining the aims and desired outcomes of activities encourages the learners' full support and commitment.
- **Design appropriate strategies (teaching, learning and assessment):**
making activities clearly relevant to the learners' skills needs gives purpose and direction to the work.
- **Expose the learners to excellence:**
enabling the learners to experience high standards encourages them to appreciate what excellence means.

- **Enlist the support of other colleagues across the organisation:**
engaging a wide range of colleagues enhances the status and significance of the skills training.
- **Establish support from employers and other external bodies:**
involving external partners ensures the relevance and standing of the vocational training.
- **Facilitate and encourage additional study opportunities:**
making learning resources available for additional study and enabling learners to go beyond the immediate requirements of their course encourages higher standards of skills development.
- **Involve the learners in the assessment of their own and others' work:**
enabling learners to analyse critically their own skills and the skills of their peers encourages an increased awareness of standards.
- **Acknowledge and reward excellence:**
recognising and rewarding excellent standards of work can enhance self-esteem, motivation and the desire to achieve a high level of skills.

2 Project report

Introduction

UK Skills and LSDA have been undertaking research into how teaching and learning approaches can help learners to develop their technical and personal skills and support the development of excellence in the vocational curriculum¹. This report provides information on the findings and conclusions emerging from the research. It will be of interest to curriculum managers and practitioners in FE colleges and work-based training establishments.

Rationale

A relatively low proportion of the UK population hold vocational qualifications, particularly at Levels 2 and 3. The UK's major skills deficiency may be related to the low numbers in the workforce trained to operate at these levels in comparison with the number trained in competitor countries such as Germany and the Netherlands. In the traditional industries, shortages at the skilled technician and craft level, and the lack of specialists in newer industries, such as information technology (IT), are seen to hinder productivity.

The final report of the National Skills Task Force, *Skills for All: Proposals for a National Skills Agenda: Final Report 2000* (DfEE 2000)² noted the need for more emphasis on the development of technical knowledge and skills within vocational learning, and on key and basic skills, in order to support the competitiveness of the UK. The report emphasised the need for curriculum designers, awarding bodies and training providers to introduce a greater breadth of accredited knowledge and skills for young people who choose a vocational pathway, in order to:

- enhance the status and standards of vocational training
- allow young people to progress in their work and training
- enable them to transfer skills once they are in employment.

Lack of investment in vocational skills, and deficiencies in the infrastructure to secure their development, has resulted in a legacy of skills gaps and shortages. At the same time, the economic climate has increased demands for new and higher levels of skills and competence. Curriculum survey reports and programme area reviews published by the FEFC highlighted the skills needs of individual industrial sectors. The Council's review of engineering (FEFC 2000)³ cited the 1997 survey carried out by the Engineering Employers' Federation, which predicted that there would be a reduction of 20–25% in the number of people employed in the industry over the next 10 years. In the same period, the workforce would need to become more highly skilled, with a higher proportion of graduates and technicians and a lower proportion

¹ Project title *A Curriculum for World Class Skills* (RR 509).

² DfEE (2000). *Skills for All: Proposals for a National Skills Agenda: Final Report 2000*. London: Department for Education and Employment.

³ FEFC (2000). *Programme area review of Engineering*, February 2000. Coventry: FEFC.

of unskilled and semi-skilled labour. In its review of construction, the FEFC reported concerns that changes in the industry would prevent training levels recovering as the industry does so, resulting in long-term skills shortages.

More recently, the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) survey of engineering provision (ALI 2003)⁴ confirmed these trends. The survey examined the findings of 231 inspections carried out between April 2001 and December 2002 and conducted in-depth research at six colleges and nine work-based learning providers. It found that employees in the engineering, manufacturing and technology industries are required to use increasingly sophisticated equipment and machinery, much of it computer-controlled, and need a great deal of technical knowledge and skill to succeed at work. At the same time, the number of people employed in most engineering, technology and manufacturing sectors has fallen over the last four years.

The report points out that engineering, technology and manufacturing companies of all sizes are experiencing shortages of skilled staff, particularly where technical skills are concerned. The greatest shortage of technical skills lies in computer numerically controlled (CNC) machine operations, assembly line/production robotics and general engineering skills. The most difficult people for employers to recruit are skilled operators/assemblers and craftspeople.

A UK Skills perspective

UK Skills is an independent organisation that champions skills and learning for work through competitions, awards and events. Established in 1990, its primary purpose is to raise skill levels in the UK through skills competitions and to manage the UK team that competes in the World Skills Competition.

UK Skills has always stressed the contribution that skills competitions make to raising standards within vocational education and training. The interest of UK Skills lies in promoting not simply the development of *competence* within vocational education and training (VET) but in encouraging the pursuit of *excellence*.

Skills competitions are competitions with a difference. They test and develop the vocational skills of those working within industry and are an excellent way of raising skill levels. The competitions are run across a range of skill areas, from welding and bricklaying to website design and catering. Each competition is specifically designed to test technical skills as well as communication, teamwork, business skills and the ability to complete projects to a high standard within a specific timeframe. The hallmark of a good competition is that it tests skills that people need to succeed in their chosen vocational career.

The World Skills Competition, held every two years and lasting for four days, is the principal way in which UK Skills achieves its mission. Talented young people, up to the age of 22, compete to become world champions in their trades. The competitors, from the 37 member nations around the world, are selected from regional and national skills competitions. The ultimate prize they strive for is a gold medal. Prior to the July

⁴ ALI (2003). *Engineering, manufacturing and technology in adult learning*. Coventry: Adult Learning Inspectorate.

2003 competition, the UK's performance at the biennial World Skills Competition had been in decline. This had become a matter of increasing concern.

The Skills Strategy White Paper, *21st Century Skills: Realising Our Potential* (DfES 2003)⁵, was published in July 2003, days after the end of the 37th World Skills Competition. It stated that:

Successful delivery of this Skills Strategy will depend on stronger partnerships between those who deliver services. The government will take the lead by bringing departments and agencies with responsibility for skills and business support together nationally. Regionally and locally, organisations which help employers to meet their demand for skills must work more effectively with those who plan and fund courses.

UK Skills is centrally located with others having influence over the supply of skills and also with employers, many of whom sponsor or take an active role in skills competitions across the UK.

Improving the UK's track record in skills contests

The most recent World Skills Competition took place in St Gallen, Switzerland, in July 2003. The UK team did well, giving its best performance for 10 years; however, the team could and should have done much better.

UK Skills' experience gained from organising competitions reflects the view of the National Skills Task Force that the development of vocational skills in the UK is not of sufficiently high quality. As a result, our young people are unable to successfully compete with the best of our international competitors.

Over the past years, UK Skills has identified the elements of training and preparation programmes that produce the best results and those factors that hinder the delivery of excellence. Behind this work was the desire to build these elements into the UK's mainstream vocational curriculum in order to encourage success in international competitions.

NVQs as a basis for excellence?

Within UK Skills, and among others involved in providing vocational education and training, there is a growing concern that National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) alone do not provide a sufficiently robust basis for initial vocational training. Much work has been done to strengthen the knowledge content of NVQs, and to include other qualifications within Foundation and Modern Apprenticeships, to develop a deeper understanding of the theory and the practical implications of their training. However, more still needs to be done if our young people are to compete successfully with the best in the world.

Key and generic skills

Reforms of Modern Apprenticeships and other vocational programmes have stressed the importance of key skills within vocational training, and the need for young people to achieve a good level in the key skills of Communication, Application of Number

⁵ Department for Education and Skills (2003). *21st Century Skills – Realising Our Potential*. Cm. 5810. London: TSO.

and Information Technology. The wider key skills of Improving own Performance, Working with Others and Problem Solving are regarded as having equal value in helping young people achieve success. There is wide recognition that success in competitions requires competitors to have these and other skills and attributes. However, the development of these skills requires support structures and teaching and learning strategies that are specifically aimed at developing such characteristics and abilities. This mix of skills is also likely to be needed to underpin excellent performance in the workplace.

The National Skills Task Force commissioned a major survey for its final report, which identified additional transferable skills and attributes that employers look for in their employees. These included:

- reasoning skills
- the ability to schedule work and diagnose work problems
- work process management skills
- the ability to visualise output and to plan work accordingly.

The Task Force used the phrase ‘generic skills’ to describe these additional transferable skills and the six key skills.

Skills for success

There is a clear relationship between the ‘wider key skills’ and success in competitions. This latter depends not only on the competitor’s technical ability and understanding of the subject, but on a number of essential skills and attributes. These include a candidate’s ability to explain what he or she is doing, to interpret an unfamiliar brief, act and react calmly when under pressure, and to make adjustments to the work in progress when work conditions and circumstances are changing.

Research undertaken by UK Skills, in conjunction with SKILLBUILD and ERAS Ltd, identified a close correlation between success in international skills competitions and the possession and demonstration of a number of key attributes:

- strong motivation and a competitive spirit among competitors
- an ability to plan and organise work effectively
- a consistent awareness of high standards
- resilience and the ability to work under pressure
- good social and communication skills, including those required for effective teamwork.

Developing vocational excellence

While the immediate concern of UK Skills is to raise to the highest levels the achievements of young people who enter skills competitions, it was recognised that the development of these skills and attributes would be useful to *all* learners in initial vocational learning. It was thought that the enhanced technical skills, a deeper understanding of the vocational area, together with the improved personal qualities and attributes which come from an emphasis on the development of transferable and key skills, will not only help the UK’s representatives perform better in skills competitions, but will generally improve their performance during training and at work. The development of these skills and attributes will:

- enable young people to progress in their training and in their work
- enhance the employability of the individual
- develop capacity to transfer skills within a rapidly changing labour market.

What employers say and what they do

Colleges and work-based training providers note the difference between the rhetoric and the reality of employers' views on the need for these skills and on where responsibility lies for their development. There are still issues to be resolved in Modern Apprenticeship frameworks and college-based vocational learning about the nature and level of the key and generic skills that should be developed, and on appropriate delivery and testing methods.

These issues are further complicated by the relatively high proportion of entrants to vocational learning programmes with poor basic skills, which need to be improved in order to support their success in vocational learning. Lack of clarity in the articulation of the differences between basic skills and key and generic skills may contribute to some employers' unwillingness to provide time for the development of such abilities to higher levels. Coupled with this, in an already crowded curriculum with reduced class contact time, there are fewer opportunities for the reinforcement and practice of generic and key skills in relation to vocational learning.

From strategy to implementation

Considerable analysis of the reasons for the lack of a skilled and educated workforce has been undertaken, but this has not always been accompanied by suggestions for how improvements could be made. Perhaps the most important development in recent years that has attempted to improve the skills delivery infrastructure has been the Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) programme. This programme acknowledges the major role of colleges and providers in the development of skills for the current and future workforce. However, it also recognises that the vocational curriculum and delivery mechanisms must be supported to keep pace with these demands in order to deliver learning that develops world class skills.

The government reaffirmed its desire to meet the skills needs of the country, and its commitment to the expansion of the CoVE programme in *Success For All – Reforming Further Education and Training – Our Vision for the Future* (DfES 2002)⁶, stating:

We expect all providers ... to look afresh at their education and training mission and to focus on their strengths. Provision must ... better meet the needs of employers and the workforce. We will further expand the Centres of Vocational Excellence network, strengthen its focus on meeting regional and sub-regional skill needs and give increased emphasis to encouraging innovative approaches to meeting these needs. The Government and the LSC will make available funding to enable the development of 400 CoVEs by 2006.

Developing an infrastructure for high-level skills development

In a little under three years, the CoVE programme is developing expertise in:

- curriculum design
- teaching, learning and assessment methods

⁶ DfES (2002). *Success For All – Reforming Further Education and Training – Our Vision for the Future*. London: Department for Education and Skills.

- extending links with employers and other external partners
- developing staff
- providing training opportunities for increased numbers of learners, particularly at Level 3
- supporting learners to ensure that greater numbers successfully complete their programmes of study.

CoVEs have an important responsibility to develop the capacity of other providers who operate in the same vocational specialisms. This sharing of good practice is carried out within the networks and partnerships that the CoVEs create themselves, and within a number of Specialist Development Networks that LSDA manages on behalf of the national LSC. It was therefore seen as important that the centres engaged in this project, which was aiming at the development of a curriculum for excellence, were members of the CoVE network.

3 Background to the project

The project on which this report is based emerged from earlier work undertaken by LSDA, UK Skills and the Further Education Skills Competition Council (FESCC), which sought to address concerns about the lack of a curriculum for excellence. The first project explored how learners' technical and personal skills might be developed beyond the expectations and requirements of the qualifications for which they were studying to enhance their performance to levels of mastery and excellence. This work is described in *From competence to excellence: Developing excellence in vocational skills* (Hughes, Smeaton and Hall 2002)⁷.

The earlier investigation identified measures that can be taken to enhance the curriculum without significant extra resources or distortion of qualification aims. However, the project was small scale, involving only three colleges and three curriculum areas with mostly full-time learners.

In 2003, UK Skills and LSDA embarked on a second research project into how teaching and learning methods can help learners develop their technical and personal skills and support the development of excellence in the vocational curriculum. This project was designed to draw on the expertise and the obligations of practitioners in the CoVE network to further develop good practice. The participating organisations were selected because they had made substantial progress in meeting the CoVE criteria. They had also stated their intention to share their experiences, not only with the other members of the project group, but also with providers of vocational education and training within their own and the wider vocational sector.

Aims

The second project was designed to:

- extend the scope of the first project by increasing the number of participating centres and range of learners
- expand the range of vocational sectors, the types of programmes and modes of learning involved and so add to the principles for effective vocational learning that emerged from the initial project
- test and evaluate approaches to enhancing the vocational curriculum in a larger number of colleges and a wider range of vocational learning programmes
- review and evaluate the costs and benefits of the enhanced curriculum
- consider strategies for the further dissemination and implementation of the curriculum enhancements.

Building on the initial project

An important difference between the first project and this second one was the fact that not all the colleges were selecting 'high flyers' who necessarily had the ability or ambition to win competitions. Some of the learners were displaying significant

⁷ Hughes M, Smeaton B, Hall G (2002). *From competence to excellence: Developing excellence in vocational skills*. London: Learning and Skills Development Agency.

weaknesses in motivation and interest in their course. What brought the project participants together, however, was the recognition that there were aspects of curriculum design, teaching, learning and assessment, that could be adapted and enhanced to effect significant change in the development of the learners' skills – skills that are essential for success in competitions, but which are also essential for success in employment.

To enable the colleges to allocate sufficient time and attention to the project, they were encouraged to incorporate aspects of their CoVE development plans that focused on the development and enhancement of the learners' vocational skills, including the quality of teaching and learning, and the promotion of progression opportunities from Level 2 to Level 3 programmes of study.

A further difference between the first and second projects lay in the fact that the second was to be only modestly funded. Colleges were asked to consider strategies that could be introduced with little cost – that were small in scope, but large in impact.

Method

Seven colleges took part in the project, including a specialist training college. The colleges were keen to get involved because they had already identified the shortcomings of their vocational provision, seeing this and the VET system generally as not doing enough to raise the aspirations and achievements of learners. They were thus already committed to raising the performance and standards of their learners.

An initial project briefing was held, which explored the rationale, aims and objectives of the project. At this initial meeting the centres:

- identified shortcomings in the existing VET system
- outlined the strengths and weaknesses of their own provision
- reviewed their provision for a defined cohort of learners and identified small enhancements they could make to their curriculum and its delivery
- aired principles and practices for the enhancement of the curriculum which they felt would support the achievement of higher standards of technical and personal performance among their learners
- identified the curriculum group with which the application and impact of the principles and practices might be tested.

Following the meeting the centres designed an action plan in which they set out:

- their individual project aims
- technical and personal skills they wished to develop with their learners
- strategies they wished to employ and the expected outcomes.

The project ran from January to July 2003. During this time, the centres piloted the changes to their provision by implementing their strategies with a defined group of learners, and reported on their findings.

LSDA provided ongoing support and paid a fee of £2400 to each college taking part in the project to cover some of the development costs and a report on the project findings.

The colleges and their learners

All the participating colleges were Centres of Vocational Excellence. With the exception of the Building Crafts College, which is a private college specialising in fine woodwork, stonemasonry, bench joinery and shop fitting, all are FE colleges. The learners who took part in the project were studying a variety of courses at a range of levels, as the table below shows.

Participating college	Programme	No. of Learners
The College of North West London	NVQ Level 2 Refrigeration and Air Conditioning	30
	NVQ Level 3 Refrigeration	5
	NVQ Level 3 Air Conditioning	16
The Building Crafts College	Activity 1: IT-based learning Bench Joinery Modern Apprentices, Year 2	10
	Activity 2: Craft demonstrations NVQ Level 2 Bench Joinery and Stonemasonry	10
	Activity 3: Video recordings of the learners' presentations NVQ Level 3 Shop Fitting	10
	Activity 4: Training in work-based recording NVQ Level 3 Bench Joinery, final year	10
Northumberland College	Part-time NVQ, Year 1 Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) learners Carpentry and joinery, brickwork, plastering, plumbing, ceiling fixing, wall and floor tiling	24
Colchester Institute	NVQ Level 2 Food Preparation and Cookery, Food Service and Patisserie	15 (7 of whom completed the project)
Middlesbrough College	Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE) Hospitality and Catering Year 1	11 (10 of whom completed the project)
Newcastle College	NVQ Level 3 Food Preparation and Cooking	9 (8 of whom completed the project)
Telford College of Arts and Technology	Level 2 Computer Engineering Technologies (City & Guilds 2360/6958)	14

Example

The College of North West London

Some of the learners taking part in the project at the College of North West London were on a Level 2 course, attending college on a 16-hour programme spread over two-and-a-half days each week. The target time for completion of the NVQ Level 2 is one year with this mode of attendance. The Level 3 learners involved in the project were day-release learners in their third year. They had taken two years to complete NVQ Level 2 and were working towards completing Level 3 in one year. Two groups of Level 2 learners were selected, with 15 learners in each group. The day-release cohort of Level 3 learners was made up of 16 registered for the Air Conditioning award and five registered for the Refrigeration award; a total of 21 learners at Level 3. All the learners contributed to the project right through to the end.

Selecting learners to take part

The courses and learners identified as participants in the project were chosen for a variety of reasons and a range of methods.

The College of North West London

The College of North West London placed great emphasis on encouraging more learners to progress from Level 2 to Level 3, reflecting the college's concerns that the curriculum did not encourage this. These concerns related to the industry's perceptions of the status of Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications: the industry perceives a candidate qualifying at Level 2 as being a fully-qualified craft practitioner. This perception is at odds with other building services disciplines – for example, electrical installation and plumbing, where the industry regards the achievement of a Level 3 qualification as representing full craft status.

Colchester Institute

Colchester Institute's Centre for Hospitality and Food Studies had recently moved into a new, purpose-designed building when the project commenced. The Institute's funding from the CoVE programme was allocated primarily to the purchase of up-to-the-minute information learning and technology (ILT) equipment to support teaching and learning, particularly the teaching of practical skills and underpinning knowledge. Still and video cameras had been purchased, together with the facilities to edit and demonstrate the learners' finished work anywhere in the centre to any group of learners for whom it was relevant.

One of the major concerns of staff within the kitchen and restaurant teaching environment was that the emphasis on teamwork enabled some learners to 'cruise' through their work, supported by their peers and by their teachers, rather than being personally challenged. The project was designed to address these concerns.

Middlesbrough College

The learners at Middlesbrough College were selected because:

- they were identified as being at high risk of leaving the course and college
- the curriculum was failing them, was perceived as 'boring' and not sufficiently practical

- they were small in number, and poor retention could render the Year 2 course unviable.

Newcastle College

The group of learners at Newcastle College was selected because the college's CoVE development plan focused on increasing the numbers and skills of Level 3 catering learners to match the changing demands of local industry. A new restaurant and kitchen had been installed, featuring specialist cooking facilities to which the college had not previously had access. The new environment provided an opportunity to train the learners to reflect modern catering trends. It supported the acquisition of the technical and customer service skills that are required of today's catering specialists, but previously have not featured in the teaching programme.

Telford College

Learners on the full-time course in Computer Engineering Technologies at Telford College were selected because the course needed the mainstream curriculum to be enhanced in a way that would give learners access to a focused enrichment activity. The learners were aged 16–19 years, were studying full-time for a Level 2 qualification and were of mixed ability. As part of their qualification they were required to complete an Electronics Examination Board (EEB) logbook of practical activities. The practical element is very prescriptive and does not encourage exploration and innovation. The teaching team recognised that a project for this cohort would motivate the learners and provide an opportunity to enhance their technical, practical, communication and presentation skills.

The Building Crafts College

The Building Crafts College specialises in fine woodworking, stonemasonry, bench joinery and shop fitting, and recruits learners from both the local area and across the country. At local level it recruits from inner-city communities within the Inner London boroughs, offering taster and pre-vocational courses and the opportunity to progress to NVQ Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications. Regionally, the college draws Modern Apprentices from the whole of the Greater London area and the adjacent Home Counties. At national level, the college attracts learners of fine woodworking and stonemasonry who wish to acquire the specialist skills required for work with specialist firms concerned with conservation, restoration and the use of traditional materials. The college's approach in the project was to identify four separate activities for different groups of learners that would enhance their confidence, self-esteem, communication and presentation skills.

Northumberland College

All 120 first-year Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) learners in construction craft classes at Northumberland College were briefed about the project and the intention to provide masterclasses. They were all invited to apply for masterclass places. In order to gain a place, the learners had to write a letter of application to the faculty director:

- explaining why they wanted to take part
- setting out their qualifications to date, attendance and time-keeping record at school and college
- predicting where they would be in five years' time
- listing reasons why they should be selected.

The director interviewed the learners who best met the criteria. It was anticipated that 10–15 learners would be interested, but 30 learners wrote such good letters that they were all offered places.

An evening induction session was held for successful applicants, spelling out clearly the aims of the project, and noting that it would also involve team building. The learners wanted a contract with stringent rules about attendance, time keeping and behaviour, probably stricter than staff would have imposed. After signing a contract, learners were referred to the specialist staff to agree an individual learning plan. The learning plan included mutually agreed goals and learners identified how they would best be supported to reach their goals. Twenty-four learners remained at that stage, with six deciding it was not for them.

Clarifying expectations

While the colleges identified the subject groups to take part in the project, most participants were volunteers. Briefing the learners and ensuring that they understood what was involved and expected of them was essential.

Middlesbrough College

At Middlesbrough College, each student was involved in a group discussion about the project and its implications. As the team leader at the college observed:

We asked for and received suggestions on activity types that the group felt would help them to 'bond' and also activities that would enhance the curriculum and bring it more into line with the expectations of the group. From this we formulated an action plan to work with.

Motivation

The fact that the learners were taking part in a project being conducted by external national agencies (LSDA and UK Skills) was a strong motivating factor for many of them, and instilled a sense of pride and commitment. Their involvement in the project also helped generate a greater awareness of the importance of training, both to them individually and to their industry.

The College of North West London

The learners at the College of North West London were briefed about the project aims and contributions that would be expected from them over the coming months. This helped to raise their awareness and appreciation of their current position within education and training and also their status within the industry. The processes of self-evaluation, which were a feature of the project, helped to promote their confidence and self-assurance.

Colchester Institute

The Year 2 learners at Colchester Institute would subsequently have their third year at college in which to further develop their enhanced skills. They would also have a 'head start' in terms of the NVQ competences that they would already have gained. This would allow them to enter competitions while still at college.

Setting clear aims and expectations

Each college identified specific outcomes they wanted to achieve from taking part in the project. Activities were then designed to address specific weaknesses or difficulties they had encountered in running their course, or developments that they had not yet had the opportunity to address. By the end of the project, it was expected that learners would have developed aspects of their technical and/or personal skills. Some of the colleges felt that the learners' technical ability was already well developed, and placed an emphasis on the development of the learners' personal attributes, such as their sense of responsibility, their confidence, maturity, positive attitudes towards work in their industry and on improvements in their communication skills.

Motivating learners to progress to Level 3

College of North West London

The need to promote vocational training and encourage more Level 2 learners to progress to Level 3 training was seen as a priority by the College of North West London. The large majority of learners in construction cease to train once they have achieved a Level 2 qualification. The industry needs more learners to progress from Level 2, which enables them to work competently under supervision, to a higher level that develops enhanced technical skills and enables them to operate autonomously in the workplace. While the industry needs more workers to be qualified to operate at Level 3, commercial pressures on many employers makes them unwilling to release employees for training beyond Level 2. Learners have consequently regarded Level 2 qualifications as good enough, and have tended to perceive higher-level qualifications as being required only by managers.

The college also aimed to encourage increased motivation and a sense of self-worth among the learners. The Level 3 learners had to think carefully about their jobs, their training and their skills in preparing presentations. They had to review critically the meaning and significance of Level 3 standards before they could promote the advantages of progression to higher-level training. A key aim for them was improving their personal and key skills, particularly their communication skills. They had to think on the spot, field questions and present information that was meaningful and relevant to the other learners. For the Level 2 learners it was an opportunity to consider what they could achieve, to aim higher and to work beyond the expectations of many employed in their sector.

Developing vocational and personal skills

Colchester Institute

At Colchester Institute the project aimed to develop and enhance vocational and personal skills within a cohort of catering students. The learners attended additional twilight teaching sessions designed to improve those specialist culinary skills that learners identified as difficult, and which they wished to improve.

One objective was to test the effectiveness of the use of video to film learners' preparing and cooking food. It was thought that this might lead to considerably increased self-awareness, and thus improved standards of hygiene, methods of working and skills. A further aspect of this was the development of learners' ability to review and critically analyse their own performance and an increase in fluency when speaking on camera.

A further need was to discover the particular skills and techniques in which the learners lacked confidence and which most felt they needed to improve. If these skills deficits were common to all the participating learners, it was likely that a similar 'set' of skills-development needs would exist among Level 3 learners generally. A series of workshops could then be offered to participants from industry, addressing some of the CoVE requirements.

The learners were filmed as they worked in the kitchen and in the restaurant, and as they gave presentations explaining what they had prepared. The video recordings demonstrated to both learners and staff how practical skills, communication and confidence in speaking on camera had improved from the beginning of the project. Because the video and IT equipment was new, the project also required the staff to develop their expertise in using this equipment.

At the end of the series of additional classes, the learners took part in a competition in which they demonstrated their enhanced skills by planning, ordering ingredients for and preparing a main course dish.

Making the course more 'hands-on'

Middlesbrough College

At Middlesbrough College, the aims of the project were to:

- offer an enhanced curriculum by enabling the learners to engage with industry through the planning and organisation of an event
- improve the group's ability to work collectively to undertake the event at a local hotel and ensure its success
- improve the individuals' own vocational and personal skills, including their communication skills, and instil a sense of professional pride
- maintain 100% retention through to the end of Year 1. At the commencement of the project in January 2003, the centre had 12 learners in the group, nine of whom had been identified as severely dissatisfied with the programme
- ensure 100% achievement of Year 1 units and 80% progression to Year 2.

The group was perceived by staff to be difficult, and attempting to achieve these objectives presented a major challenge for the teachers.

Catering as ‘show business’

Newcastle College

As a result of their CoVE status, Newcastle College completely redesigned its catering facilities to reflect the latest in restaurant and kitchen style and design. This meant that the catering learners were on show while working in the kitchens, and were expected to communicate and interact with customers more directly than they had previously. Greater emphasis was placed on the development of personal as well as technical skills, with a particular focus on communication, presentation and social skills, and on the development of self-confidence. The Level 3 learners were expected to present the new face of catering at Newcastle College, in which the learners were no longer to be hidden from public view, but had to enter the restaurant, converse with customers, explain their dishes and the ingredients used, and act as 'ambassadors' for the Chefs Academy. To be able to do this successfully, it was recognised that the learners needed to broaden their professional experience.

Newcastle College's project aims were therefore to enable the learners to:

- develop and broaden their social and personal skills
- adopt the role of 'ambassadors' when the new Chefs Academy opened later in the year (the Academy was part of the college's development of a Centre of Culinary Excellence)
- improve their technical skills using the college's state-of-the-art facilities.

From design to production

Telford College

At Telford College, the intention was to help the learners develop their computer engineering skills by extending their electronic design and constructional capability in the field of digital electronics. The project was designed around an integrated assignment that focused on developing the learners' ability to design, demonstrate and market a product.

The learners' confidence and sense of self-responsibility would be developed through their need to exercise initiative, to research the product, to consult their teachers as and when help was needed and to manage their own time. Finally, the product was presented and 'sold' to a panel of experts.

By the end of the project, Telford College's learners were expected to be able to:

- design a printed circuit board, using industry standard software
- solder and construct circuits on the printed circuit board, demonstrating a higher level of skills than is normally associated with their programme
- fault-find the constructed circuit
- present, demonstrate and 'sell' their final product to a panel.

The college hoped that the enthusiasm generated by this new approach to an important unit of the course would improve the learners' progression rates from Level 2 to Level 3, and that the technical and personal skills developed would improve their career and employment prospects.

Building self-esteem

The Building Crafts College

At the Building Crafts College the aim of the project was to encourage greater self-esteem among all its learners through public and peer recognition of their skills. It also demonstrated that motivation, rather than prior skills or academic attainment, is the most significant factor in achieving craft excellence. The college's approach was to analyse a number of activities already being piloted by the college as examples of ways in which quality improvements could be made with very limited extra resources.

The college's action plan comprised four activities that focused on their aims.

- In Activity 1, 'IT-based learning', computer-based learning was introduced as a means of developing key skills. It was also designed to consolidate the knowledge underpinning the NVQ, to enrich the NVQ provision and improve achievement rates. The college produced learning packages to introduce the learners to basic IT skills, which also supported the development of other key skills. The key skills were integrated within the context of the learners' programme of study and so consolidated the learners' underpinning knowledge.
- In Activity 2, 'Craft demonstrations', the aim was to improve the learners' confidence and esteem through their involvement in craft demonstrations to schools and community groups. The activity added extra dimensions to the college's traditional craft training programme by improving the learners' oral communication skills, their confidence when dealing face to face with outside groups. It also increased public awareness of vocational and training opportunities.
- In Activity 3, 'Video recordings of the learners' presentations', the aim was to improve the learners' confidence and communication skills. The video recording of the learners' presentations of the craft products they had made not only helped to develop their oral skills but also served as a record of the project work they had undertaken.
- In Activity 4, 'Training in work-based recording' for NVQ Level 3 learners in their final year, the aim was to provide additional industry-related knowledge and competences beyond that required by current NVQs and to improve the confidence and status of the learners within their work environment. It also contributed to the support of work-based learning through the training and supply of additional work-based recorders in industry.

Pride in the vocational pathway

Northumberland College

At Northumberland College, the project aimed to improve the learners' practical construction skills and their personal skills. The college organised additional masterclasses in a range of craft skills to enable the learners to design and build a SKILLBUILD model, or a similar technically difficult project. The project was designed to improve the learners' confidence, not least in their technical ability to carry out a complex construction task. In so doing they were expected to improve their ability to work as a team, and to work independently, managing their own time and planning their own work.

The project participants were also required to assist their teachers when school groups visited the construction department. The learners were asked to show pupils around the department, to assist the staff in carrying out practical demonstrations and to explain the career opportunities available to school leavers in construction. These additional activities served to increase the learners' confidence, self-esteem and pride in their vocational pathway.

Choosing project participants

Colchester Institute

Staff at Colchester Institute did not want to exclude any learners from the participating group but had the prospect of all 40 learners wanting to take part.

As the project leader at Colchester Institute commented:

We explained the project to each of the three second-year groups and made them aware of the commitment they would have to make if they agreed to take part. Fifteen learners decided that they wished to take part, and each received details that gave precise information about the project. In terms of academic and practical skills ability, personality and drive, they were a very mixed bunch but we were determined not to allow our perceptions of the learners to cloud our judgement about whether they would be effective participants in the project.

Some of the 15 soon decided that the commitment was too much for them, and formally withdrew. Some found that they were expected to work on Monday evenings in their part-time jobs (when the project was taking place) and also had to withdraw, and one student who was very keen to take part was not able to remember from a Friday to the following Monday that he needed to bring his knives and clean 'whites', and so was refused entry to the kitchens. Eventually there were seven participants.

4 Strategies for an enhanced curriculum

Identifying excellence

The primary aim of all the projects was to encourage and enable the learners to achieve higher levels of vocational and personal skills development as a prerequisite to the achievement of excellence. It is an obvious statement, but nonetheless an essential conclusion to reach, that for learners to achieve excellence they must first recognise and experience it.

Many learners, whatever their vocational area, have a somewhat limited range of experience. Excellence, whether it is in the production and serving of food, or in the design of an engineering product, is often restricted to what they have experienced in their own everyday environment. It was essential, therefore, to expose the learners to high standards and outstanding quality products within their specific vocational environment in order to help them recognise excellence.

Colchester Institute

Colchester Institute, where the learners were expected to be involved in competition work, hosted the area final of a prestigious competition to enable the learners to see what they should aspire to later in their careers.

As the project leader at Colchester Institute observed:

Because competition work was one of the primary aims of the project, we agreed to host the area final of the 'Essex Chef of the Future' to show the participating learners what might be the next level of competition they could aim for following their own internal competition at the end of the project.

It was interesting to see the effect that watching young professionals who had already been out at work for a couple of years had on the learners. None of them had seen a cookery competition at college before, as the last two years had been taken up with planning, building and then settling into the new £6 million catering facilities. This lack of a model of high catering standards and what is involved when entering a competition was a more serious omission than we had realised.

Learners in the project also had an opportunity to work alongside third year learners and to appreciate what they could achieve and the standards of work they should be working towards.

As the project leader explained:

During the learners' first term, our patron, Gary Rhodes, officially opened the new building. The preparations for this event gave the learners an insight into how critical it was to prepare attractive, carefully planned food for important guests. The group also worked alongside third year learners preparing food of

a far more complex nature, which gave them some idea of how much further it was possible to develop whilst at Colchester Institute.

Experiencing excellence as a customer

Middlesbrough College

The learners at Middlesbrough College recognised for themselves that their experience and appreciation of what constituted excellence within the field of hospitality and catering was extremely limited. They requested that their awayday take place at a high-quality establishment. With this in mind it was decided to go to a restaurant with a Michelin star for excellent quality, food and service in order to impress the concept of excellence on the learners. The restaurant had been asked to provide a reduced menu with some unusual dishes. This was to encourage the learners to taste food that they would not normally encounter at home, and proved to be a major talking point with some very interesting reactions.

Newcastle College

A similar approach was adopted by Newcastle College. The college wanted the learners to develop a professional approach – not only to their culinary skills, but also to the way they interacted with customers. Here too it was felt that the learners' horizons and experiences were somewhat limited. Before they could begin to aspire to the professionalism the college envisaged, and before they could begin to put into practice the high standards of culinary skills and customer service skills required of them, they needed to experience excellence and high levels of professional practice. The learners undertook a study tour of well-known, top class establishments in London.

As the project leader commented:

The learners visited Harrods food hall in order to experience the quality and range of food on offer and were amazed at the richness and variety of the produce. They also visited four top-class restaurants, dining in two of the venues, so gaining an insight into the way professionals interact and promote themselves when 'on show' in open plan kitchens.

The learners visited the kitchens and interviewed the chefs, managers, food and beverage staff and front-of-house staff. For most of them this was their first experience of dining in such high quality surroundings, experiencing such levels of professional customer care and savouring food cooked to world class standards.

Back at college, the learners began to develop new menu items that they produced and tasted prior to introducing them as part of the a la carte menu.

Competitions

As the first LSDA/UK Skills project had demonstrated, considerable benefits are to be gained from entering learners for competitions. The catalyst for the previous project had been the relatively poor showing of UK learners in international competitions. Competitors from other countries have traditionally demonstrated a higher level of

competence than the UK's learners. Their excellent performance in international competitions has been largely attributed to the way they have approached a competition: their meticulous preparation, their speed and accuracy of working, and their resilience and positive attitudes. However, although learners from other countries have demonstrated greater technical proficiency, their technical skills have not been vastly superior.

Preparing to compete

The project provided colleges with an opportunity to prepare their learners for competitions and to emphasise the skills and attributes that UK Skills' research has demonstrated make for success. These include the ability to:

- analyse carefully what is required
- recognise high standards and constantly strive to achieve them
- work under pressure
- be resilient when things do not go to plan
- work effectively with others
- explain to observers what you are doing and why
- nurture a desire to win.

Newcastle College

All the Newcastle learners were prepared for competition work in their regular NVQ classes. Those who were interested stayed for two weeks' extra training outside class time before the competition. Specialist staff gave up time for this. Learners were very enthusiastic and won five awards from the seven events.

In addition, the Newcastle learners coordinated a team of learners from several different NVQ courses in the Catering Managers Association (CMA) culinary competition that was held in March 2003 in the Newcastle United banqueting suite at St James' Park. The aim of the CMA competition is to enable learners from colleges across the country to compete against each other in a number of areas, such as cuts of vegetables/meat, gueridon work and using a 'Ready Steady Cook' box of ingredients from which the learners have to create a dish. The competition provides an opportunity for colleges and learners to gain some recognition for their expertise. It necessitates good communication and organisational skills and the need to coordinate the activities of peer groups and colleagues from the industry. Feedback from the learners was extremely positive. This was their first experience of being under the spotlight, representing the college and the hospitality industry.

Working to a competition brief

Colchester Institute

Staff at Colchester Institute are strong supporters of competitions, noting that:

There needs to be a continuous drive to encourage learners to enter competitions so that it becomes normal for them to want to demonstrate their skills and knowledge against those of their contemporaries. The world of competitive cookery has its own history, and any young person entering it needs the advice and experience of experts already familiar with the standards and protocols involved. To allow a complete cohort of professional chefs to spend their three years at college without ever seeing or participating in a competition would be doing them a grave disservice. Unless they are pushed

beyond what they think themselves capable of, they will never reach their true potential.

Learners were given a competition brief in which they had to plan and order the food they needed for the dishes they were to design. The dishes had to demonstrate the skills they had developed. The competition allowed them one hour to cook and present three portions of their chosen recipe. One portion was for the judges to taste, one was for the group to taste and one was to be kept back for each student to be filmed presenting and explaining on camera their reasons for its development. The criteria for judging were set by the learners, and staff used these to produce the marking scheme for the competition. This had the benefit of making the learners aware throughout the competition of what they needed to concentrate on to gain good scores. Their selected criteria also encouraged the staff, as they were made aware that the learners were beginning to think like professionals.

Rewards

The offer of a prize, albeit small, can add to the learners' motivation to do well. A modest reward, to the winner of a competition or to the best student in the year group, can provide an added incentive and can help mark the achievement of excellence.

Colchester Institute

At Colchester Institute, a first prize was mentioned but nothing specific in terms of what it might be or its value. In fact, all the learners participating in the competition were given a simple digital camera with which to record their progress during their final year at college. The winner was awarded a camera with a higher specification. All the learners are now expected to incorporate visual images in their written CVs and to produce collages of their work during IT key skills lessons as part of their NVQ Level 3 portfolio of evidence next year.

Northumberland College

At Northumberland College, new tool sets were purchased, which were used exclusively by the masterclass learners. The aim was to instil in the learners a sense of pride in their tools and to make the learners feel special. In contrast to the normal mainstream classes, from which a number of tools regularly go missing, none of the tools was lost.

Demonstrations

Colchester Institute

Colchester Institute invited experts to attend their skills development sessions in order to demonstrate specific skills and techniques to the project learners. The learners, in turn, practised what they had been shown, while the expert commented and guided their work.

At each session, the learners had to first carry out identified tasks themselves. This was necessary in order to establish their existing skill levels and so that we could measure any improvements. All this was filmed individual by individual. All the learners had to speak to the camera as if they were taking

part in a competition and were explaining what they were doing to independent judges.

An expert chef then demonstrated the skills very slowly and carefully and explained each step of the process as he was carrying it out. Again, this was filmed. The resulting films were edited in-house to produce videos for future use, as the techniques demonstrated were those needed by every Level 3 Food Preparation and Cookery student. After the first session each of the learners was given a video made from the digital filming of their work. They were e-mailed a grid in which they were asked to comment on their performance against a list of nine criteria, and to suggest what improvements they would make against each of these.

Northumberland College

Teachers working on the project at Northumberland College were supported by staff from supplier organisations, who provided technical advice and demonstrations on their specialist products.

All six of the staff involved in the project were competent in at least two vocational areas. Three organisations sent technical staff to give product demonstrations and technical advice to the learners. One member of staff volunteered to carry out the periodic reviews of learners during the project. This involved the employers in an attempt to link off-site training to the learners' on-site experience. Employers appeared very interested in the drive to achieve excellence in vocational skills.

Experience in demonstrating skills

Northumberland College

It was recognised at Northumberland College and at the Building Crafts College that the learners lacked a degree of self-confidence and self-esteem. To help overcome this, the learners at Northumberland College assisted the staff in showing school pupils around the construction department, explaining what was going on and carrying out practical demonstrations.

The Building Crafts College

The Building Crafts College organised a series of skill demonstrations in a number of schools and community venues, in which the learners could talk about and demonstrate their craft skills. This approach had the additional benefit of making a wider group of people aware of these specialist crafts and the skills required. The approach has now become a regular feature of the college's outreach and community work in east London.

To improve the confidence and communication skills of another group of learners, the college organised a series of recording sessions in which the learners could video presentations of their craft projects. At the end of the presentations, the learners had an opportunity to comment on their own performance and on that of their fellow learners.

Learner A

The Building Crafts College

Learner A came to the college as an unemployed adult. He worked his way through NVQ Level 2 and NVQ Level 3 in Bench Joinery and clearly demonstrated a strong aptitude, and indeed a passion, for handcraft skills. He was somewhat diffident and lacking in confidence but he accepted the chance of taking part in a series of craft demonstrations.

Of particular note was a demonstration at a secondary school, where the attitudes of pupils were seriously affected by the prevailing street culture and adverse peer pressure. The learner carried out a simple demonstration of basic hand tools and simple joints using a 'workmate' in front of about 20 pupils. One of the pupils slouched low in his chair pretending to be asleep most of the time. Learner A talked simply but eloquently about the use of tools and the various steps that he was taking to demonstrate simple halving joints. At each stage he passed the work piece round the audience to reinforce the sequence of cutting the joints. At the end of the demonstration the teacher expressed surprise that the group had been so attentive. Normally in such circumstances they would be causing mayhem!

Learner A gained much confidence as a result of these demonstrations and is now employed as a workshop-training assistant.

Awaydays

Throughout the project the emphasis has been on fostering a group identity and teamwork, and in most cases an awayday or weekend was organised to promote this. Northumberland College and Middlesbrough College found this to be beneficial in creating a constructive atmosphere in which, in the case of Middlesbrough College, an initially rather negative and dissatisfied group of learners began to work well together to organise an event.

Bonding the group

Middlesbrough College

Following discussions about the action plan at Middlesbrough College, it was decided that an awayday would be useful to encourage the group to bond and to start work on the event. The learners asked for this to take place at a 'quality' location away from college. As the project leader notes:

After sumptuous coffee and homemade cakes, the group looked at what our objectives for the day should be. Following this, they broke into small working parties and began allocating responsibilities for the event. This worked very well and it was a pleasure to see the whole group working together and sharing ideas. Members of the group who had previously not got on were now working together and forming partnerships. Towards the close of the day, the learners were asked to complete an evaluation of the event. The general response was positive, with the feeling that the group had come a long way in just one day.

Additional course elements

The colleges were aiming primarily to improve the level of their learners' skills development, encouraging and enabling them to aim for excellence. But some of the colleges also wanted to increase the breadth of the learners' experience in order better to reflect the current demands of their vocational sector and to give the learners the opportunity to acquire the additional skills employers now require.

Developing a more relevant curriculum

The College of North West London

As a result of consultation with industry representatives through employer forums the curriculum offered within the College of North West London was developed to more appropriately meet industry needs. Employers had stated that the Level 3 qualification and skills did not adequately reflect current employment needs. As a result, further qualifications, such as electrical qualifications for all NVQ Level 3 Refrigeration/Air Conditioning learners, and the City & Guilds 2381 scheme for *Requirements for Electrical Installations (IEE Wiring Regulations – Sixteenth Edition)* have been introduced.

Middlesbrough College

Middlesbrough College had purchased a new software package to enhance the learners' curriculum, give variety to teaching and learning methods and broaden the learners' experiences. A computer-based hotel simulation package (HOTS) enables learners to make decisions about running a hotel across a period of many weeks. It allows them to view the effect their decisions have on the profitability and viability of the hotel. This helps learners understand the importance of gathering data before making decisions and the consequences of ill thought out choices. It proved popular with the group, with some learners requesting additional sessions.

Newcastle College

Newcastle College introduced a new Customer Service programme, accredited by the Hospitality Awarding Body (HAB). This new Level 1 qualification concentrates on the basics of customer service to hospitality learners, which is not covered in NVQs. Assessment is by means of a short-answer test, which is downloaded from the internet. The programme enabled learners to explore the theory behind customer services, later put into practice when the Chefs Academy opened. The programme focused on a wide range of customer service skills, and included role-plays and how to handle customers' complaints.

Masterclasses

At Northumberland College and Colchester Institute, volunteers attended masterclasses for an additional two-and-a-half hours each week to support them in the development and refinement of technical and personal skills.

Northumberland College

The learners at Northumberland College attended construction courses on a block release basis, spending three weeks in the college and three weeks on site with their employers. It took dedication and enthusiasm to stay late on a Tuesday evening for

additional classes. Occasionally, learners were working on site on the day of their masterclass. Nonetheless they were all prepared to travel considerable distances into college for their extra instruction.

To help the learners through a long day, the college provided a buffet before the start of the masterclasses, enabling all the different craft learners and their teachers to spend time together in a relaxed atmosphere. At first the atmosphere was rather subdued but soon relationships between the learners and staff, and among the learners themselves, changed – becoming much less formal and more relaxed and cooperative.

The learners at Northumberland College were given intense tutor support, with one member of staff working with only four learners. Such individual attention is not normally possible in mainstream programmes due to the high recruitment levels to these popular courses. Assessment was on a continuous basis, through observation, question and answer and periodic review.

Colchester Institute

The learners at Colchester Institute agreed to attend extra skills development sessions every Monday evening from 4.30 until 7.00pm. They identified the particular skills they found difficult and wished to improve. At the end of the series, they took part in a competition amongst themselves in which they demonstrated their enhanced skills by planning, ordering ingredients for and preparing a main course dish. Independent chefs from industry judged the competition.

During the practical sessions they were continually photographed and recorded on video, with the aim of having their own personal ‘visual’ CV that they could take with them to show a potential employer. The expectation was that this would ideally show the marked skills improvement from the start to the end of the project, and would also show how much they had improved their communication skills and their confidence in talking on camera.

An integrated assignment

Telford College

At Telford College the project was designed as an integrated assignment that added to and complemented the learners’ normal programme of study. The project had two distinct strands: the development of the learners' *technical and practical* skills and the development of their *personal* skills. The technical element of the project was designed to enhance the learners' ability to design and construct electronic circuits using industry standard equipment. Because the learners had to manage their own time, conduct research, gather and present the results and communicate the information to an audience, the activity developed both their personal and communications skills.

The project was run competitively to strict deadlines. Learners worked independently, seeking advice from the lecturing and technician staff and other sources of support as appropriate. The teaching was offered on a one-to-one basis, with advice and guidance sessions intermingled with whole group work.

Example

Telford College brief

A large electronics organisation commissions you to design, build and test a logic probe as part of a research and development project. You must produce the probe within a strict time frame. Calculating the costs, testing reliability, and the attractiveness of the design are all part of the commission.

Events

Middlesbrough College

At Middlesbrough College a group decision was taken to organise and run an event at a local hotel. The hotel had expressed a desire to cooperate with the college, and arrangements were made to plan and organise a public event for 150 paying guests. The hotel had offered the college the use of its facilities as part of the college/employer liaison initiative. The event supported one of the Year 1 Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education (AVCE) units. The date of the event was set and the learners set about planning meetings and collating ideas for the theme. Meetings were set up with the hotel staff, the theme of a sixties rock and roll night was agreed upon and a menu was formulated.

Newcastle College

The learners at Newcastle College were invited on to HMS Newcastle to prepare and serve a meal on board the ship while it was on a visit to the Tyne. The learners prepared and cooked a meal for the ship's crew and their invited guests, followed by a cocktail party in the evening. All the learners were presented with certificates and had their photographs published in the local press. This was an important and very public occasion for the learners, who had to demonstrate not only their technical skills but also their ability to present themselves well on this very public occasion.

The same applied to the opening of the Chefs Academy at the college. As the project leader observed,

There have been a number of events to mark the opening of the Chefs Academy, each reflecting various aspects of it. Learners were responsible for producing and serving the food on each occasion. The final opening on 8 July allowed the learners to demonstrate their new social and personal presentation skills when they demonstrated and explained the new equipment/dishes in the new kitchen to industry chefs and the press.

Additional study time

Learners were given the opportunity to devote more time to their studies.

College of North West London

At the College of North West London the college's workshops and practical learning resources are now open and available to the learners on Saturday mornings. Although this facility was originally intended to support those learners who were falling behind in their course, the demand from all the learners has been enormous. This service has been made possible by the commitment of technicians, staff in the learning resource centre and lecturers.

Peer group involvement

College of North West London

One of the objectives of the College of North West London was to promote the benefits of further training to Level 2 learners, and to present career opportunities within their vocational specialism of Refrigeration and Air Conditioning in order to encourage them to progress to Level 3. Day-release Level 3 learners were involved in this promotional activity. The learners had to consider their communication skills, plan carefully what they would say to their peers and decide how to say it.

The Level 2 learners found it refreshing to have their fellow learners rather than their teachers address them in this way. They were more relaxed and entered more freely into a dialogue.

The Level 3 day-release learners were able to refer to their actual and current work experiences, they could focus on work-based evidence and experiences, and could set their comments in the context of the complexities and activities of contemporary site working – something the teachers were not able to do.

The dialogue between the two groups generated greater enthusiasm among the Level 2 learners. At the same time, the Level 3 learners developed a greater sense of pride in their area of work and in their development of vocational skills.

Links with industry

The relevance of the learners' technical and personal skills development was emphasised through links with employers. Such links are an essential feature of the CoVE criteria and the colleges were keen to develop these. Closer working with employers ensures that the teaching programmes are relevant and meet industry needs and that staff and curricula are kept up to date. Regular contact with employers also reinforces to the learners that the skills they are developing are current and in demand. The nature of the work and employment available to learners gives them a strengthened sense of purpose and increased motivation to apply themselves and do their best.

The College of North West London

The development of close links between the College of North West London and the world of work was important in demonstrating the value of their vocational training to the learners. An example of how such links are developed can be seen in the organisation, planning and successful outcome of the Faculty of Technology Industry Day and Awards Ceremony held in March 2003.

Links were developed with a contractor involved in a prestigious local construction project. The contractor is the major developer for the new National Stadium at Wembley and is very positive about the relationship being developed with the college. Each learner who was nominated for an award was given a trophy and a certificate.

Telford College

At Telford College, a prominent local industrialist was invited to be a member of the panel that judged the learners' final projects. As one aspect of the learners' work was for them to 'sell' their finished product, the involvement of a businessman gave the

exercise authenticity and motivated the learners to take the task extremely seriously and to perform at a much higher level.

Middlesbrough College

At Middlesbrough College, the learners gained experience of working with industry through the organisation of an event, even though their experiences were not particularly positive. They liaised with the hotel, organised every aspect of the event, including the booking of a band, the creation of menus and the marketing and costing of every aspect of the event.

Uniforms

The learners in all the colleges appreciated the fact that they were being treated differently. This made them feel special. Time, effort and money were being spent on them in an attempt to help them achieve more than they might normally. The extra investment made in the development of their skills encouraged the learners in turn to make an extra investment in their studies.

Newcastle College

The learners at Newcastle College were provided with new, modern uniforms, dispensing with the traditional chef's hat and trousers. All the learners could be identified by this distinctive uniform when working in the new college restaurant. This helped them to develop a sense of pride in their appearance and in their work.

Production of additional resources

The Building Crafts College

At the Building Crafts College, where the aim was to improve the learners' key skills and underpinning knowledge, a range of craft-related questions were devised and were then developed into computer-based exercises. In addition, a workbook was produced which covered basic keyboard skills and a simple range of computer-based exercises. The aim was to support the development of the learners' IT key skills, and to contribute to the development of their numeracy and literacy key skills.

The college also wanted to give the learners the opportunity to qualify as work-based recorders. The college produced a work-based recorder presentation pack based on materials produced by the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB).

Wider involvement across the college

In several of the colleges, the project caused the staff and/or learners to acquire new skills or engage in activities that were beyond their immediate competence. This involved colleagues from other parts of the organisation. At Colchester College, for example, IT technical staff trained the catering staff to operate the new IT, video and camera equipment.

Middlesbrough College

The learners at Middlesbrough College enlisted the help of the college's marketing department as well as the technicians within their own department. Experts within the college assisted the learners in the marketing and organisation of their event. This included the college marketing department helping with posters, flyers and press releases, chefs helping with menu and recipe compilation and service staff advising on aspects of food service and banqueting preparation.

5 Impact

Enhanced personal skills

An observable outcome of the project was the increased confidence, professionalism and self-esteem the learners developed, and the enhanced motivation that learners displayed towards their course of training specifically and towards their vocational area and sector in general. These were characteristics that the colleges felt were not developed within qualifications such as NVQs.

Personal development

Colchester Institute

At Colchester Institute, the learners showed considerable personal development. As the project leader observed, there was 'a lot of growing up' taking place during each session, particularly when the learners were under pressure during the final competition session. The learners had a big shock when they first saw their own personal video. They found it difficult to analyse their performance, be self-critical and suggest how they could improve. The project appears to have changed this group of young people into individuals who are confident in their abilities. They are now prepared to practise repeatedly in order to improve their skills and to demonstrate those skills as competitors in a variety of events.

Independence

Telford College

The learners at Telford College developed their personal skills further than the teachers had hitherto experienced on this type of course. They accepted responsibility for their own learning, worked independently, approached appropriate staff when necessary and requested the resources and materials they needed in order to complete the project. Their personal confidence improved. They could now talk confidently about the design and construction techniques they had used. The final part of the project required the learners to present and 'sell' the product using a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation.

Learner B

Telford College

Learner B joined the course in September 2002. He had work experience in the Merchant Navy as a trainee engineer. Electronics was a career path he wished to follow. Although on a Level 2 course, his technical skills have developed tremendously. His logic probe design utilised leading-edge surface mount technology to reduce the physical size of his circuitry. It was clear from his PowerPoint presentation that his personal skills had developed well through the project. His presentation was clear, logical and confident.

Enthusiasm

The College of North West London

At the College of North West London the learners developed a better appreciation of the content and structure of their training programme. The Level 3 learners, who were on a day-release course, emphasised in their presentations the relevance of the college-based training to the job requirements. The Level 2 learners committed themselves to their studies with greater enthusiasm and motivation, and expressed a clearer commitment to progress to Level 3 training than they had previously.

The very clear associations between ‘on the job’ and ‘off the job’ requirements were recognised and understood by learners at both levels. The integration of college work and ‘real work’ practices and experiences can be seen as a significant motivational factor for progression. Indications from the questionnaires show that 90% of the Level 2 candidates are either ‘considering progression’ or ‘definitely wishing to progress’ to Level 3 training.

A sense of purpose

Middlesbrough College

Despite difficulties in realising all the aspects of the project at Middlesbrough College, many of the planned objectives were achieved. Many of the learners had been identified early in the year as being in danger of dropping out of their courses, with the college facing the prospect of an unviable second year. The event that was planned, unfortunately had to be cancelled. However, all the work the learners had done in preparation for the event had motivated them to the extent that most of the group have stayed the course and intend to continue into their second year. Learners' attitudes and attendance improved and learners showed commitment and a sense of purpose. The group began to work well together and individual skills began to show through. One learner (Learner C), who had been predicted to achieve a low grade, began to shine and achieved good assignment grades.

Learner C

Middlesbrough College

‘In December I had had enough of the course. It was too classroom based with no real input into the practical way of working in the industry. I had decided I was leaving at the end of term! Then we were told about the project and the possible hotel event and I felt interested again. We had a lot of additional class sessions but these had a real purpose as they directly related to our event. We had a fantastic day out at the most amazing hotel. This was a real eye opener and showed what can be achieved. We began to work well as a group and started to make progress.

Unfortunately the event had to be cancelled so we will not now know if we would have succeeded. The overall impact of the project was a success and the additional classes and events made a big difference. I think I will return for the second year.’

Team building

Northumberland College

At Northumberland College the learners attended regular team building sessions carrying out activities chosen by the group.

Improved key skills

The Building Crafts College

At the Building Crafts College success rates in key skills almost doubled, reaching 84%, and all the learners who completed the computer-based learning package achieved their full qualification. The learners who had taken part in the skill demonstrations and video presentations showed much improved self-confidence, motivation and a greater determination to complete their course successfully.

The Building Crafts College External Verifier commended the college on its innovative approach to developing communication skills and the use of video recording equipment. The learners were all nervous but nonetheless enjoyed the experience. Whilst the playback sessions attended by the entire group generated friendly banter and laughs, the feedback was nonetheless most positive. It is anticipated that, given extra time and the right equipment, these videos can be edited to produce both training and promotional videos

Time management

Northumberland College

At Northumberland College the majority of the learners completed their SKILLBUILD project within the allotted timescale. They worked effectively independently and in groups, allocating sufficient time for the design of their product and for careful consideration of the technical implications.

Twenty-two out of 24 learners at the college completed their projects within the given timescale, showing their ability to manage time and to set realistic short-term goals. Quieter members of the group gained in confidence and clearly improved their problem solving skills. If something did not go as planned, they could suggest alternative ways of working. The discussion of problems became the norm throughout the sessions, with many learners giving suggestions. More able learners took control of their own learning with minimal input from teaching staff. Some excellent work was produced: coffee tables, a cue rack and tiled motifs, all of a much higher standard than required for Level 2 NVQ.

Excellent camaraderie was evident between learners and staff. Masterclass sessions were less formal than usual mainstream programmes and during the team-building visits, learners mixed with staff on a social level. The whole group gelled well as one team, mixing with learners from various trades. Normally the learners mix only within the same trade discipline. Attendance at every class was excellent, as was punctuality.

Enhanced technical skills

Inventiveness

Telford College

Where the colleges set out to improve the learners' technical ability this was achieved. The learners at Telford College successfully completed the design of the logic probe circuit using industry standard electrical computer-aided design (ECAD) software (Proteus). They produced a printed circuit board and etched and drilled it ready for construction. All learners then went on to solder and construct the logic probe circuit, using fault-finding techniques to get the product working.

The learners showed considerable imagination and inventiveness in the materials used. One learner constructed his probe using a pocket torch, and retained the light to enable the probe to be used in dark areas that were difficult to access. Another used a fountain pen, and designed a circuit board slim enough to fit inside. Another adapted a dispenser in which mints are sold.

Learner D

Telford College

Learner D, an overseas student, joined the course in September 2002. His analytical ability was greatly heightened by this project. He designed the casing for the probe first and then made a circuit to fit; a perfect example of reverse engineering design. Most of the group approached the task the other way round. His technical skills were taken beyond Level 2 when he decided to utilise surface mount technology for his circuit. Learner D had very poor presentation and IT skills at the start of the course. These have improved tremendously over the duration of the project, resulting in a brilliant PowerPoint presentation.

The competitive element of the project worked well. In their desire to perform better than others in the group, some learners took their projects beyond the basic specification of the project and the requirements of the course. They used, for example, specially adapted plotters to produce very fine tracks on the printed circuit boards so that surface mount technology could be used.

Additional qualifications

The College of North West London

Some of the learners have had the opportunity to acquire additional skills during the course of the project. At the College of North West London, many of the learners studying NVQ Level 3 Refrigeration and Air Conditioning have taken the opportunity to gain an additional electrical qualification to enhance their technical skills. This has proved popular both with the learners and their employers, as the broader range of skills better reflects the current needs and requirements of the job.

The Building Crafts College

The Building Crafts College introduced work-based recorder training for NVQ Level 3 learners who were in their final year. The purpose was to enhance the learners' technical skills, knowledge and qualifications with industry-related skills that took the learners beyond NVQ competences and requirements. This activity was a logical extension of the experience learners had already obtained in the NVQ assessment of

their own projects and portfolios. They are now able to take this knowledge back to their firms and can also assist other NVQ candidates in assembling work-based evidence. Given that many supervisors and managers in industry do not understand the NVQ system, this knowledge of work-based recording can be a great asset and is certainly an important means of improving the status and confidence of young learners who have recently qualified.

Customer service

Newcastle College

At Newcastle College, CoVE funding had enabled the college to acquire new, state-of-the-art facilities, such as a podium cooker on which the learners were able to develop the latest skills and techniques. During the various functions to celebrate the opening of the Chefs Academy, the learners explained to the guests the kitchen design and equipment, as well as the dishes they were preparing, and demonstrated their newly-acquired customer service abilities. They showed much improved self-confidence when they coordinated their fellow learners for the CMA culinary competition. They worked constructively and professionally with their teachers and support staff in developing the menu items and service standards in the Chefs Academy.

Staff development

Colchester Institute

Staff as well as learners benefited from activities associated with the project. At Colchester Institute, CoVE funding had enabled the centre to purchase IT and video equipment and to employ an IT trainer. The project provided an opportunity for the equipment to be tested and for staff to develop their skills. A variety of learning and testing materials for online learning have been produced in-house, initially by specialist IT staff, but eventually by all staff within the centre.

The IT trainer has enhanced the IT skills of the staff. As the project leader reported:

...the three staff involved in the project wanted to familiarise themselves with the newly-purchased IT equipment. They wanted to use the project as a means of testing what worked or didn't work in terms of filming individual learners and also in recording skills demonstrations by teaching staff for use later in revision sessions. Staff also wanted to know how time-consuming it was going to be to turn these skills videos, or clips from them, into something of sufficiently good quality to be put on the 'E-Learning Environment'. This could be accessed by a variety of learners, both on and off the premises. The E-Learning Environment would also help the centre meet its CoVE objectives in interesting and engaging ways by providing access to NVQ Level 3 materials and standards for people working in industry who needed to improve their skills.

6 Measuring added value

It was important to attempt to measure the impact of the project activities on the learners, and to assess the difference made to the development of their skills.

Staff and student surveys

All the colleges employed a series of surveys of learners' and teaching staff's perceptions. In most cases, a questionnaire was issued at the beginning of the project, and again at the end to measure learners' development, and to assess whether they felt that they had benefited from their experiences.

The College of North West London

At the College of North West London questionnaires were used to gauge changes in the learners' attitudes towards their programme of study, to assess their motivation for training and to find out how they regarded their future prospects within their industry. The questionnaires were also used to assess the quality and impact of the Level 3 learners' presentations on the Level 2 learners and to find out what effect the presentations had had in influencing their interest in progressing to Level 3 training. The questionnaires gave learners an opportunity to express any reservations they had about continuing their training, to identify any additional initiatives and information that would help them make decisions and to indicate the likelihood of Year 2 learners progressing to Level 3.

The teachers/teaching teams also completed questionnaires in which they recorded their observations of the learners' progress, of attitudinal changes and whether the aims of the project had been achieved.

Student profiles

The learners agreed a learning plan for the duration of the project. Their skills and attitudes were profiled at the beginning of the course, to determine where their strengths and weaknesses lay, and again at the end of the project in order to determine how much they had developed. At Northumberland College, periodic reviews of the learners' progress were carried out, often involving employer and trade specialist representatives.

Presentations

Telford College

Telford College introduced a competitive element into their project. The learners were required to design a logic probe, cost it and finally 'sell' it to a panel of judges that included an industrialist as well as the teachers. The learners were judged on the basis of their technical preparation and final product, on the clarity and content of their presentation, their interest/enthusiasm, and their verbal and non-verbal skills. The progress the learners had made during the course of the project was clear to see.

Retention and achievement rates

Colleges made predictions early in the year about the anticipated attendance pattern, completion rates and achievements of the learners. In some cases, these were supplemented by added-value calculations that the colleges applied to all their learners. In a number of cases, the colleges reported performances considerably above the original predictions.

Middlesbrough College

Middlesbrough College had anticipated a significant drop in the number of learners completing the first year of their course, making the second year unviable. The college's fears did not materialise. Many of the learners were motivated by the project, not only to stay the course, but also to achieve grades in excess of the college's initial predictions.

Newcastle College

Success rates in examinations were also an indication of the 'distance travelled' by the learners during the course of the project. This applied not only to the learners' core course but also to the additional elements they studied. At Newcastle College, for example, all learners who studied additionally for the Hospitality Awarding Body's Customer Service qualification passed the examination.

The Building Crafts College

At the Building Crafts College, success rates among the Advanced Modern Apprentices in Bench Joinery increased and key skills success rates almost doubled to 84%. All the learners who took part in the project and completed their computer-based key skills package achieved their full qualification. Among the NVQ Level 3 Bench Joinery learners, all have now registered with the awarding body as work-based recorders.

Control groups

A number of the colleges identified a control group of learners not taking part in the project. These were usually a parallel class or the remaining learners in the year group who had decided not to take part in the project. Use of a control group enabled Colchester College to assess the impact of their strategies by comparing the progress of two groups of learners.

For the learners involved there was no doubt that the main benefit to them lay in the development of their enhanced skills in comparison with their peer group, their increased self-confidence in front of the camera, and in their ability to relate in a relaxed and unforced way to adults.

Visual records

Colchester Institute

The videos that Colchester Institute made of the learners' practical and presentational skills demonstrated their considerable progress since the beginning of the project. It will be even more important to discover during the next year whether the seven learners who took part in the project remain noticeably ahead of others in the group and whether they have maintained a desire to compete in the external competitions.

The Building Crafts College

At the Building Crafts College, the learners' video presentations demonstrated their technical and communication skills and displayed their final product. The presentations provided evidence of the progress the learners had made in the development both of their technical and personal skills. This produced satisfactory evidence for their Communication key skills portfolios and all but one of the learners passed the key skills external tests.

Observation

Some of the best critics of the learners' performance are the learners themselves. The groups worked closely together for several months and knew one another's strengths and weaknesses. They could observe the progress individual learners were making. A number of the colleges used the learners' observations and assessment of each other's performance and progress during group discussions to help gauge the difference the project work had made.

Sampling the product

In catering, an obvious way to assess the progress the learners have made is to sample the product. This was done on a regular basis by the staff, learners and the customers, who then commented and provided feedback. The extent to which the learners had developed an ability to experiment and create new and exciting dishes was evident by the end of the project.

Colchester Institute

At Colchester Institute, which organised a competition that was similar to the BBC television 'Masterchef' contest, the learners had produced their main course three times, as described on page 24. One dish was for the judges to taste, the second enabled the learners to comment on each other's work and the third was used for filming, when the learners presented their work on camera.

In the catering colleges, guests in college restaurants were asked to comment on the quality of the food, the newly designed and refurbished restaurants, and on the learners' performance, appearance and social skills.

7 Lessons and conclusions

The role of teachers

The importance of the staff in helping the learners to achieve high standards cannot be underestimated. When the CoVE programme was being launched and the characteristics of high-quality provision were being defined, providers were unanimous in recognising the essential contribution made by dedicated teachers and support staff.

Many staff in further education and training are highly dedicated and fully committed to their learners' progress. The teachers responsible for these projects were already heavily committed, with full timetables. Nonetheless, all of them enthusiastically engaged in the project work, and were prepared to dedicate more time and effort to raising the level of their learners' performance.

Principle

Good teachers make a difference! Their skills, knowledge, commitment and expertise are the most important resource in a curriculum for excellence.

Matching teaching strategies to learning needs

One of the striking aspects of the way that teachers reacted to the challenges of the project was the care they put into considering different ways of teaching and learning in order to secure the outcomes of mastery and excellence. It is clear that many teachers have the expertise to differentiate the learning experience and to coach learners to achieve beyond what would normally be expected. But to do this they need encouragement, resources and, to some extent, permission. The project provided some of this, along with the added support of the project consultant and network of participating colleges, and the backing of LSDA and UK Skills.

Principle

Teachers need to be encouraged to think creatively about the methods they use and the relationship of these to the needs of the learners, the skills that need to be developed and the anticipated learning outcome.

The need for good planning

Careful planning and launch of a project will ensure a successful outcome. It is essential that it is achievable within the set time frame. The project will have greater impact and will absorb the learners' interest and motivation if it:

- can be integrated seamlessly in the learners' main programme
- gives rise naturally to opportunities that will further develop the learners' technical and personal skills
- is not regarded as a 'bolt-on' additional element.

It is important that resources are available on demand and, therefore, good technician support is pivotal to the smooth running of the project. In addition, teachers need to learn how to use new equipment, such as camcorders and editing equipment.

Example

Telford College

Following the success of this project, the electrical/electronic engineering team is introducing another project to the National Diploma full-time group next academic year. A dedicated project slot has been built into the group's timetable to facilitate this enrichment activity. It may be deemed an 'expensive' option. However, with the huge funding implications surrounding the retention and achievement of full-time learners, it is essential to integrate successfully a project that motivates learners and drives them to higher levels of technical and personal skills than they thought possible.

Principle

Careful planning, preparation of the teaching activities and detailed briefing of the learners ensure that curriculum enhancements are integrated effectively into learning programmes.

Planning and implementing the curriculum

Fresh methods and fresh results

Additional activities and new approaches need not be complex, very costly or time consuming. Simple activities and simply produced materials can produce substantial and tangible improvements in the development of the learners' skills.

The Building Crafts College

Despite the very simple nature of the computer-based exercises produced by the Building Crafts College, the impact and results were evident in terms of the improvement in the learners' key skills and underpinning knowledge.

Colchester Institute

There is undoubted value in visually recording learners' practical work for them to use as an aid to self-improvement. At Colchester Institute, the learners began to see themselves in a different light and became more self-aware and self-critical when confronted by the evidence of their appearance and performance. The fact that the

learners had a record of their own improvements, which they will take with them into their final year of study, has been an important motivating factor.

Example

Colchester Institute

This was the first time the learners had been face-to-face with irrefutable evidence of how they looked, sounded and worked. It was one of the most important outcomes of the project and one that the Institute wishes to use with all learners at some stage in their programme. Learners in many cases become deaf to comments about their performance from their teachers. Having evidence that they can analyse and use to help them improve can only be of enormous benefit and will hopefully improve the skills development of all future learners.

Principle

Implementing a curriculum to support excellence does not call for rocket science and need not cost the earth.

Additional demands and additional benefits

Identifying learners who are prepared to commit themselves to extra work, such as the masterclasses, in order to gain further skills and knowledge brings benefits and satisfaction to both learners and staff. The learners delighted in their own ability to produce standards of work that, before the project, they thought were beyond their capabilities.

Example

Colchester Institute

Sign on the kitchen door at Colchester Institute:
"‘Good enough’ is the enemy of excellence'.

Principle

Teachers and learners need to have high expectations of the standards they can achieve. Higher standards of achievement bring higher degrees of satisfaction and self-confidence.

Involving the learners

Giving the learners a major responsibility in designing and organising the project activities, setting their own goals and organising their own team-building activities encouraged their ownership of the project. They were strongly motivated to apply themselves to their work and put greater effort into improving their technical and personal skills. Allowing learners to play an important part in the structure of an assessment process led to marked improvements in that assessment.

Example

Northumberland College

Getting the learners to write their own 'contract', which they then signed, had a very positive effect on the learners. The contract set out the requirements for their attendance at the masterclasses, the required behaviour and time keeping.

One learner attended college on a Wednesday. He was so interested in the masterclass that he persuaded his employer to let him change his day at college. He then never missed a session.

Principle

Learners need to be actively involved in planning and implementing an enhanced curriculum – such as setting goals, organising aspects of learning and taking responsibility for all aspects of their learning.

Experiencing excellence

Peer promotion

The concept of 'peer promotion' has proved to be very effective. It is one thing for teachers to promote the benefits of training, and to encourage their learners to make greater efforts, to invest more time and effort into the development of their skills, and to strive for higher levels of achievement. However, when these messages are given and reinforced by their peer group, the impact is clear to see.

Principle

Reinforcement of the value of excellence in skills development needs also to come from the learners' peer group.

An awareness of excellence

Learners benefited from the opportunity to understand what constituted excellent performance, to experience excellence as consumers, to observe the performance of experts and to practise their skills in order to emulate professional practices.

Visits to high-quality establishments and demonstrations by established experts provided the models of high standards of performance. The use of regular video recordings of the learners' work provided powerful evidence of their level of performance, and, in time, of progress made.

Principle

Learners need to have opportunities to experience excellence, to look beyond the standards they experience in their everyday lives and to develop their skills through example, practice and constructive feedback.

External experts

The use of external experts to observe the learners at work and to assist in the judging of their competition work (as in Colchester Institute's use of prominent local chefs and restaurateurs), had pronounced effects on the learners and staff. The learners took greater pride and care in their work. They behaved professionally, knowing that they were being scrutinised by leading professionals in their field.

In the same way, Northumberland College, Telford College and the College of North West London invited prominent local industrialists to the college to assist in the review and judging of the learners' project work and to award certificates and prizes.

Principle

Using experts from the world of work adds credibility and authenticity to the learning experience and provides examples of what constitutes excellence.

Competitions

There is value in arranging competitions for learners to enter, whether internal or external. The focus on competitions enables the learners to acquire the skills and attributes that UK Skills' research had revealed as being necessary, not only for success in competitions but also for work generally, namely:

- an ability to analyse carefully what is required
- the need to recognise and constantly to strive to achieve high standards
- an ability to work under pressure
- to be resilient when things do not go to plan
- to work effectively with others
- to be able to explain to observers what you are doing and why
- to nurture a desire to win.

Principle

Competitions provide experience of working under pressure and within set constraints. Maximising this experience depends on effective feedback and debriefing on performance.

Learning relationships

Success breeds success

Learners want to succeed. They want to achieve their goals and to reach high standards of performance. Everyone likes to excel. But sometimes the commitment involved is daunting. Sometimes the extra time and effort required are in conflict with other priorities and commitments.

All the colleges commented on the fact that learners who were not involved in the project began to take an interest in what the project learners were doing. It became apparent that the project learners were engaged in interesting and rewarding activities; that they were doing more and achieving more than their fellow learners; that their

skills were developing; that their relationships with each other and with the staff were constructively different.

Example*Colchester Institute*

As the project developed, other learners, who had chosen not to take part or who had not organised themselves to free up their Monday evenings, began to express regret as they could see that the seven participants were starting to learn some advanced skills that they themselves would not achieve until the next academic year. The learners involved in the project were also starting to develop extremely good relationships with the staff involved. It is difficult to imagine how these closer relationships could develop without some activity acting as the focus.

If competitions were to be an integral part of a student's programme, this closer relationship between the expert and the novice would develop, bringing all the benefits that we observed during the project.

Principle

A mature relationship between teacher and learner, more akin to that of expert and novice, often underpins the development of excellence.

Improving external links

Many of the activities introduced by the colleges involved liaison with external partners: schools, community groups, other colleges, employers and professional bodies. While the activities have brought clear benefits to the learners, they have also been extremely useful for outreach purposes. In this way, the centres have been able to improve their external liaison, which is also one of the key CoVE criteria.

Example*The Building Crafts College*

The college has developed a package in partnership with a local managing agency to provide new opportunities for long-term unemployed adults. Of the 10 learners on the programme, five were sufficiently motivated to volunteer to spend one evening a week in the workshops to get extra training time to work towards an NVQ Level 2.

Two of these learners volunteered to assist with craft demonstrations on the college's stand at the Redbridge Show. They talked enthusiastically to members of the public and seemed greatly to enjoy the experience. Given their enthusiasm, the college was able to negotiate additional training time beyond the original 10 weeks, with the result that they achieved all the underpinning knowledge and practical assessments required to complete the full NVQ at Level 2.

As a result of their enthusiasm, and the recommendation that the college was able to make on their behalf, they now both have a six-week attachment over the summer recess with a shop fitting company working on a contract in Canary Wharf. The construction director of the company is taking a personal interest in their work and the college is optimistic that both learners will be offered full-time employment.

Principle

Build external relationships with enthusiasts and enlist them as 'natural supporters' for the project.

Dissemination and exchange of good practice

One aim of the CoVEs is to ensure that the good practice that is being developed in the centres is shared with others. The CoVE programme has been designed to raise the standards of vocational education and training, not only within the participating centres but also across the sector as a whole. As part of their development plans, CoVEs have described how they intend to disseminate their good practice. The colleges participating in the project, being CoVEs, are also making plans for dissemination.

Newcastle College

Newcastle College, for example, is intending to set up a CCTV system by which the college is linked with Westminster College. By this means, learners can be videoed and their work in the kitchens and restaurants relayed to the partner college. Culinary skills can be expertly demonstrated in one location and seen by the learners in the other. The expectation is that the skills that the learners and the staff have developed in all the participating colleges as a result of this project will be widely shared. They will serve to transform practice throughout the vocational education and training sector, helping to raise the skills of the UK's learners to world class levels.

Principle

Sharing emerging expertise can accelerate its development.

Flexibility

Be realistic

It is easy for enthusiastic staff to be over ambitious when designing their action plans. What seems a good idea at the initial planning stage is sometimes identified as unrealistic. It is tempting to expect too much of the learners within a short timescale. At Northumberland College and at the College of North West London, the action plans made provision for the learners to accompany or assist staff giving public presentations about their construction crafts. However, the teachers over estimated the ability and willingness of the learners to stand in front of large groups of pupils and teachers to promote their vocational areas. If the realisation dawns early in the project that learners are being overwhelmed, minor amendments and alternative actions and outcomes can be built into the project. In other cases, where an event is a major focus of the project and it fails to take place, colleges need to have an alternative strategy in reserve.

Principle

Keep the purpose of learning outcomes and the development of the learner at the forefront at all times. If existing aims and learning strategies are not working, be prepared to adapt them.

‘Plan B’

Despite considerable enthusiasm and hard work on the part of learners and staff, there is no guarantee that everything will go to plan. It is always worth bearing in mind that whatever *can* go wrong *will* go wrong. When so much time and effort have been invested in a project of this kind, it is very disappointing if the plan does not work as it should. It is recommended that a fall-back position should be planned in case the original plan collapses.

Example*Middlesbrough College*

The date of the event was set and learners began to plan meetings and collate ideas for the theme. Meetings were set up with the hotel staff. All appeared to be going well, but that was to change. Making contact with key personnel at the hotel proved difficult and so key decisions could not be taken. This delayed a whole series of activities, and as a result the marketing and promotion of the event did not get off the ground quickly enough. This resulted in poor numbers being booked and so the college decided to postpone the event. A new date was set and the group continued to work on the assignment and the event. However, difficulties in liaising with the hotel staff continued until finally the event had to be cancelled.

The cancellation came too late in the day for the learners to arrange an alternative event. Therefore, they had to proceed with their assignments on the basis that the event had been planned and explain in their evaluation what caused it to fail.

Principle

When depending on external support for curriculum enhancements there will be things that fall outside the control of the college or provider. Contingency plans should be considered to ensure that similar learning outcomes can be achieved.

Resources

Time

Staff are already heavily committed to their day-to-day work. Additional commitments with the project (such as its design, more meetings, the organisation of extra activities, the production of additional course materials, organising competitions, preparing the learners and familiarising oneself with new technology) all impose greater demands and strains on staff who are already busy. This is especially the case when coupled with the introduction and requirements of CoVE status, not to mention mergers and inspections.

Principle

Time is the most precious resource in the development of a curriculum for excellence. Providers need to think carefully about how they use the time of lecturers and learners to ensure that decisions about its allocations are based on relevant learning outcomes.

Timing

The timing of projects of this nature is inevitably a critical issue. It is never easy to choose the ideal timing for such an activity, if there is an ideal time at all. Because of the need to relate to the CoVE specialist development groups, this project was introduced later in the academic year than originally intended. For this reason, it took

place over a shorter timescale than first planned. The colleges had less time to plan their activities than they would have liked.

Principle

There is no single optimum point for the introduction of a curriculum for excellence – different types of activities can be introduced at various points in the learning programme. However, forward planning can ensure the best use of resources and a better link between learning and performance.

Additional costs

Although the aim of the project was to enhance the learners' personal and technical skills by making relatively small and modest changes to the curriculum, and to the teaching and learning strategies, inevitably some extra costs were incurred. Costs associated with staff time, the purchase of materials and equipment, and the cost of additional travel to take learners to visit schools and community venues, must all be calculated within the overall cost of provision. The colleges felt that many of these additional costs, with some careful and imaginative planning, can be covered without too much difficulty.

Nevertheless, some of the activities the colleges introduced were relatively expensive. But extra resources were found from a range of sources such as industrial sponsorship, financial support and support in kind from local businesses and professional organisations, and additional project funding from the local LSC to support the development of excellence within craft training.

Principle

While extra funding can help, a great deal can be done within existing resources by adapting and reorientating existing curricula and teaching methods.

Incentives

NVQs

The colleges were in agreement that much of what they wanted to achieve, both in terms of technical and personal skills development, was not encouraged within the NVQ framework. NVQs are focused on the development of competence to do the job, and on the achievement of outcomes to an acceptable level. The NVQ system of competence-based assessment is not necessarily the model to use when trying to develop excellence in craft skills. For example, it was commented that catering learners' social and personal skills development has been ignored since the advent of NVQs. This project demonstrated how important such skills are, particularly with the current fashion of open-plan kitchens and restaurants.

There are opportunities but no requirement to develop higher levels of skills, additional skills, or to promote personal characteristics such as confidence, self-esteem and pride in one's vocational area of work. Once learners realise this, it can be difficult to persuade them of the benefits of investing more time and effort into their

programmes of training in order to achieve higher levels of skills, or to acquire additional skills that are not essential to the qualification.

The lack of grading within NVQs reduces the incentive to perform at the highest levels and to achieve one's best. An overriding aim of the colleges' activities was the desire to fill such gaps and address such deficiencies.

Principle

Incentives other than the NVQ are needed to encourage the support of excellence as a routine undertaking within vocational learning.

