



# In Search of Excellence

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This paper expresses a number of issues that NIACE believes should be addressed during the development of the Centres of Vocational Excellence. It aims to provide some background information and comment that will add to the debate during the development and implementation phase of the CoVE programme. It is based on observation of a third of the Pathfinder centres and discussion with senior staff in those institutions.

NIACE manages the Further Education Forum for the Education of Adults (FEFEA).

FEFEA exists to support adult learning in the FE sector. It is a forum for FE staff to share their experience and responsibility for working with adults and in widening participation.

The FE Forum provides the opportunity to:

- Meet and share good practice
- Review common challenges
- Receive news, briefings and updates on policy developments
- Brief NIACE for advocacy work where needed, and help shape NIACE's future work

Opinion, comment and feedback on issues raised in this paper are welcome.

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## In Search of Excellence

NIACE welcomes the Government proposals to introduce Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) within the Further Education sector.

NIACE supports:

- the potential of the Centres to broaden opportunities for adult learners. In particular, the Centres will be expected to develop 'strategies to promote access from those groups traditionally excluded from learning or disadvantaged in the labour market'.
- the extension of opportunities for individuals to participate and progress in learning.
- the injection of resources to develop and promote excellence.
- the modernisation of the sector and improvement in status of colleges. This will provide an opportunity for fuller participation by colleges in developing individual and national prosperity.

There remains a number of concerns that needs to be addressed during the development of the CoVE programme:

- The development of the Centres must not result in any diminution of the opportunities that are currently available to adult learners. A modern FE sector must contribute fully to social inclusion and widening participation.
- A failure to recognise that local centres of learning are potentially more important to many adult learners than centres for *vocational* excellence
- Any concentration of resources to encourage excellence must not detract from the Government's commitments to a more inclusive agenda.
- A primary goal in the development of CoVEs must be to benefit all learners. They must not be seen to give preference for learning for 16-19-year-olds with predominantly full-time attendance. Opportunities for adult learners must be enhanced and developed.
- There is a need to ensure that adult learners who can benefit from the development of CoVEs are not excluded by the absence of other support structures and/or a transport infrastructure.

## Centres of Vocational Excellence

In November 2000, David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment, set out his vision for a modern FE sector in *Colleges for Excellence and Innovation*. Central to his vision was a modernisation of the role colleges play in meeting the economic challenges we face.

The demand was for a further education sector that is flexible and responsive, and sharply focussed on meeting the skills needs of employers.

Yet the Secretary of State continued to recognise that further education should not only play a key role in the economic agenda, but is also central to meeting the social objectives of the lifelong learning agenda. Economic prosperity and social cohesion were seen together and the Secretary of State stressed that this should be recognised and addressed.

He stressed the wider role for further education, working with and supporting partners in the community and voluntary sectors, playing a key role in delivery of information, advice and guidance, and addressing the basic skills needs of adults.

The initiative to develop Centres of Vocational Excellence in Colleges has moved on rapidly. The target to establish the CoVE network has been brought forward by 12 months – 50% of all colleges to have at least one CoVE by 2003/4.

The LSC published its *Prospectus* for the development of CoVEs and announced the Pathfinder Colleges in July 2001. All colleges will be able to submit proposals to develop Centres of Vocational Excellence from December 2001. There are already discussions and plans to roll out the concept beyond colleges and into non-FE providers, including sixth form colleges with level 3 provision, external institutions and potentially work-based providers.

### What does this mean for adult learners?

There are four key questions:

- What are the implications for adult learners and providers of adult learning within this rapid development?
- How will the vision of vocational excellence be developed alongside the continuing need to develop a sector that maintains its social objectives?
- Will opportunities for adults be enhanced or restricted?

- What will happen to provision in colleges that is not recognised as excellent – or indeed that is not seen as vocational?

## The Pathfinder Network

Sixteen colleges have been designated as Pathfinder Colleges of Vocational Excellence.

The Pathfinder centres will operate as a network to support the implementation and further development of CoVEs.

Currently there is no absolute guidance to determine what is meant by 'excellence' (although work is currently under way at the LSC to establish guidelines).

What, then, has distinguished the Pathfinders to be selected as the leaders for the initiative?

*NIACE has visited a third of the Pathfinder Centres to speak to Principals, CoVE managers and staff, to identify some of the common features behind recognition of 'excellence' and find out what has led to them being chosen as role models for the sector.*

Many colleges could look at the choice of the Pathfinders and at the respective vocational areas and consider that they are at least as good (if not better) than those chosen. So, why have some been selected rather than others?

A number of factors has affected the choice of colleges/vocational areas. These seem at first glance to be more concerned with establishing models, reflecting a range of vocational areas and location; and not about excellence in the sector.

No matter how good you are, the choice of Pathfinder Colleges had to take into consideration a mix of:

- geographical distribution
- size of colleges
- rural/urban/inner city locations
- specialism in older traditional industries alongside new developing and/or niche provision
- meeting local, regional and national market needs
- partnership models.

There has also been a clear and welcome attempt to find a mix of models that will offer a wide range of experiences for the sector to use as benchmarks.

All the chosen colleges have been able to demonstrate the achievement of a Grade 1 in the selected area of their last inspection and can point to performance indicators at or above national averages in recruitment, retention and achievement. But what else is common?

One feature is the all-round 'soundness' of the quality of the college provision. There were no inspection Grades at 4 or 5 in other parts of the college; all have sound financial status; and many have other current badges of excellence – beacon, accredited, or industry recognition. There is also a

### The Pathfinder Centres and specialist areas are:

Accrington & Rossendale College	— Construction
South Tyneside College	— Nautical Science & Marine Engineering
Bradford College	— Applied Science
The Arts Institute at Bournemouth	— Lens-Based Media
Bishop Burton College (E.Yorks)	— Agriculture
Sparsholt College	— Game, Wildlife & Country Management & Fishery Studies
Birmingham College of Food, Tourism & Creative Studies	— Hospitality & Catering
South East Essex College	— Media Technology
Tameside College	— Mechanical & Electrical Engineering
Warwickshire College	— General Engineering
Lewisham College	— Computing
Barking & Havering Colleges with Ford	— Auto Engineering and Mechanical Production
South Birmingham College	— Childcare
Richmond Adult & Community College	— Business & IT
Lancaster & Morecambe College	— Hospitality & Catering
Leeds College of Technology	— Printing

sense that none of the colleges have any 'skeletons' that could cause embarrassment during the roll-out phase. All this shows sound judgement in the selection process – after all, if there are to be mentors for the sector they need to be acceptable as genuine role models.

However, even some of the Pathfinder Colleges have pointed out that areas of their colleges that were not included in a recent inspection meant that these areas were excluded for consideration. In some cases, these excluded areas were seen as at least equal to – if not better – than the chosen specialism. Inspections can rarely be comprehensive.

## Recognising excellence

The Pathfinder CoVEs have a sound basis to work from. They hold a Grade 1 in the selected vocational area from a previous inspection. All can draw attention to good teaching, high retention rates, high and increasing student achievements. Most can point to a range of external awards that already recognise their standards. There are many outstanding links with industry. Clearly, this is the basis of the search for and the desire to recognise excellence. Quality provision, high standards in the classroom, retention and achievement, and close liaison with industry to identify and deliver training needs are not a closely guarded secret but an ever-increasing set of requirements on the sector.

Visits to some of the colleges reveal a range of common factors, which collectively give an indication of how outstanding provision can be achieved and recognised as 'excellent'. These are additional to those discussed previously in the Pathfinder Network.

### **Time and investment**

It is clear that excellence has not been achieved quickly or cheaply. The areas of vocational provision are the result of prolonged periods of vision, belief, investment and strategic direction. There is no magic formula: excellence has been the result of sound leadership and management planning, trust and belief in high quality staff, and repetition to get it right.

*Ruth Silver at Lewisham said, 'It has taken 10 years to get this right. Excellence does not happen overnight.'*



*At Warwickshire College, engineering staff first began their specialised industry links back in the mid-1980s.*

*The newly-refurbished science building at Bradford is an integral feature of an accommodation strategy that stretches back to incorporation in 1993.*

*Sparsholt College indicated that they had built their industry links over a 10-20 year period, and that this also stems from developing and tailoring courses that met both the local and national needs of land-based industry.*

### **Leadership**

The Principals/Managers of the Pathfinder Colleges are clearly delighted to have part of their college recognised as excellent. Yet, among all, there is recognition that their aim is to provide 'excellence' for all the learners attending their colleges. All expressed a belief that at least one or more parts of their colleges deserved similar recognition – and that evidence existed to support this view.

There were consistent and re-assuring statements that further education colleges should be

both comprehensive and inclusive in their provision. A common theme expressed by the Principals was that they did not see this as an initiative to enhance vocational provision for 16-18-year-olds, but a development for all learners – and adult learners in particular must be able to benefit.

This was a time to accept the recognition of a specialised area of provision, but that would not replace the vision of responding to the needs of existing and potential learners. All wished to contribute to widening participation, be more inclusive and to achieve excellence in vocational provision. They also wish to provide excellence throughout their whole range of activity and to reflect the social as well as the economic needs of learners.

### **Staff**

When speaking with staff, their commitment, motivation and sheer energy is striking. But how has this been achieved? In most cases, it is clear that management has confidence in the staff to allow them the time, space and delegated responsibility to pursue ideas and ideals. Vocational excellence has resulted from staff being allowed to participate in the vision, and in planning implementation. Staff had been involved in and felt a part of the achievement of their college.

*The industry links at Warwickshire College with major companies such as Rover, Jaguar, Rolls Royce and Massey Ferguson have been a direct result of staff working directly with their industry colleagues. Together, they have reshaped curriculum and delivery to reflect the needs of each different company. The staff have been rewarded with highly-motivated adult students who can see the direct work-relevance of college. Equally, companies have made significant donations of equipment (including a Tornado engine) so that their students can be trained on the right equipment.*

*At Bradford College, a former mill building has been turned into a science centre specialising in applied science, and by that they mean real work-related science. Staff have been included in planning, design and equipment specification throughout the centre. The result is a centre that is genuinely 'owned' by both staff and students. Staff have recognised that the College has invested in their*

*high-quality vocational development, and the result is a highly motivated workforce.*

*At Sparsholt, many members of staff have maintained the currency of knowledge and expertise through management and operation of small farms, shoots, and so on. There is also a significant investment in staff development – recently all the staff from the Fishery Studies courses were supported in a week-long study tour to Ireland.*

### **Industry links**

All the centres are able to point to highly-developed industry links. These range from active advisory panels (usually including some high-powered influential members of the local community) through to formal association in the provision of courses, and usually including some level of sponsorship/support in the form of equipment, facilities, and so on.

*The choice of a small rural college, Lancaster & Morecambe, to be a Pathfinder Centre in Hotel and Catering is probably a major reflection on the way they have developed links throughout the Lake District with many hotels and catering outlets. Their catering was awarded a Grade 1 at the last inspection, but working at some distance makes them special.*

*The specialist provision at Sparsholt means that staff are frequently invited to undertake and present the outcomes of research at both national and international conferences. National conferences in both Fishery Studies and Game, Wildlife and Countryside Management are held on-site with the advantage of bringing industry representation into contact with the college. Research and testing conducted on behalf of industry not only produces useful income, but also frequently benefits the college through gifts of industry-standard equipment and materials.*

### **Resources/Accommodation**

Is a Centre of Vocational Excellence something that is physically separate? Can colleges point to a special and separate facility, and say that is the centre of excellence? Indeed, do they want this to be the case?

Of the colleges visited, only one had a separate building, but others were planning for a physical centre. All had specialist facilities that could be perceived as 'separate'.

*The science facility in Bradford was a result of a near £5 million investment. It looks, feels and is treated by staff and students as special. However, although the Principal and Manager both feel that this asset has speeded up and made excellence obvious, both feel that excellence is more than this physical reality. It is important that there is something/somewhere to be proud of, but recognition of excellence for all was seen as more important. There is a clear wish to extend this 'excellence' beyond the 'walls' of the college into the community. The college is developing first-line opportunities by taking new courses into its community provision to benefit a wider group of adult learners and to establish progression routes in Applied Science for a new set of learners.*

There was an overriding sense that if industry was to be convinced, then a physical centre of excell-

ence needed to exist. The opportunity to upgrade or develop existing facilities was seen as one of the biggest benefits to obtaining CoVE status. Most colleges were keen to create a facility that would be of industry standard and one which merited the identification as a 'centre of excellence'. This could be an enhancement of existing facilities, but there are many plans for new and separate facilities.

## Outstanding issues

- The CoVe initiative presents a challenge to Further Education and the direction that it could take in the future. Further Education has had two very distinct roles and traditions. The first is that of technical and vocational education. The second is that of access, opportunity and personal development. The creation of special vocational provision or support of the specialisation of colleges may well fit into the LSC brief to plan provision and meet economic needs. But does this mean a loss of self-determination and an end to the concept of the comprehensive college? The



NICK HAYES

further education sector remains inclusive and believes in its role of providing access and opportunity. The nagging doubt about the commitment of the LSC to deliver both must still linger. The debate caused by the first draft of the LSC corporate plan, where participation targets for adults were omitted, is a case in point. Colleges have pushed forward on Government plans for wider participation, inclusion and providing opportunities for new adult learners to progress towards and achieve higher level skills and knowledge. College Principals have maintained this in their vision of colleges' role and will continue to need support to achieve this.

- Does the creation of areas of excellence within specific vocational areas enhance or devalue the rest of a college's provision? The creation of CoVEs has led to debate within the sector that identification of some colleges or parts of colleges as 'excellent' effectively downgrades those not designated as such. This is not an intended outcome. Their creation is a welcome recognition of the quality of vocational provision that is already being achieved in colleges. The aim is to boost specialist vocational provision at level 3 and beyond. It is recognition of specialist excellence. There is no intent to exclude other aspects of college provision from recognition – but that is not part of this initiative. However, to maintain the broader appeal of the sector it is important that recognition of achievement in other aspects of provision, such as first-rung work in communities or work with students with learning difficulties, should be available and celebrated through equally high-profile means.
- Is there a danger for adult learners that the CoVEs are encouraged to create full-time learning opportunities that particularly appeal to the 16-19 (and increasingly the 14-19) market? To date, this does not appear as a primary feature in the development of CoVEs. Industry is looking for improvements in the development of skills at level 3 and in training to enhance their workforce. This will embrace the needs of adult learners with the means to access this training. The key will be to ensure that there are appropriate first steps in learning and fully-developed progression routes with support systems that ensure that adult learners



can and do benefit from this investment in excellence. It is also significant that the establishment of Centres of Vocational Excellence is identified as an objective within Target 4 in the LSC Corporate Plan ('Raise achievement of adults').

- What are the implications for specialist vocational provision in the colleges that do not gain recognition as CoVEs? Are they automatically inferior? This cannot be the intention, as it is not expected that every area in a college can be badged as 'vocationally excellent'. Yet such provision needs to have a clear role and place in the sector. Are the non-recognised colleges or departments within colleges intended to be feeder centres to the specialist centres of excellence? If this is the case, then provision up to level 2 should be protected, but can the resource ever be interpreted as other than less valuable than that in the CoVEs?
- Could the creation of CoVEs mean a loss of provision if a college is not recognised as a centre of excellence? Is this part of local/regional planning within the LSC? If it does, what are the implications of access for students, particularly adult learners? Adult learners are likely to lose out if there is any loss of local provision unless the new specialist centres also

provide travel, childcare and other support systems necessary to underpin equal opportunity and inclusive provision.

- Is the future one of partnerships and planned progression routes? How far will the LSC be involved in determining these patterns of provision? Rationalisation of provision that benefits more learners must be welcome. However, the planning must encompass progression through first-rung learning, from community bases, to encompass the needs of learners that must be developed before they can benefit from the vocational excellence that should be on offer.
- This continuing area of concern is one to watch as the programme rolls out. Adult learners are the ones most likely to lose from any negative outcomes of this initiative. Loss of provision, lower status of some institutions or the absence of a support infrastructure to enable adult learners to access the new vocational centres could all represent a poorer learning environment for adults.
- In rural and/or remote areas can we expect to see enormous strides forward in the use of new technology in promoting access? If so, then the future for adult learners in these communities must be enhanced. This has got to be a requirement in the planning policy of LSC in the development of the centres. If not, provision for adult learners must be threatened.
- The Government believes that the new centres will attract the support of, and from, industry. This has happened already, as is evident in the Pathfinder Centres. But if Ford, Rover and Vauxhall can be expected to encourage vocational centres to produce their future workforce, can the same be expected of local small and medium-sized outlets to develop their workforce? There has to be some concern that the success of CoVEs is related to the support of 'big' industry. The SME sector must be encouraged to play its part fully.

*Some of these concerns are already being addressed, or at least recognised, within the Pathfinders and in the debate to date.*

The jury remains out on the potential exclusion of disadvantaged or non-traditional adult learners from this level of excellence. Colleges remain committed to inclusive programmes that provide

ladders of opportunity for all students, particularly adult learners. However, the need for vocational and educational training to have recognition and to provide skills mean that, at this time, only high-level learning programmes and qualifications will currently merit recognition as 'excellent'. If further education genuinely is to play a "key role in the economic agenda" and also be "central to meeting the social objectives of our lifelong learning agenda" (David Blunkett, *Centres for Excellence & Innovation*), the wider appeal of colleges has to be kept at the forefront of change.

Excellence in all college activity should continue to be the aim. Recognition of excellence in vocational specialisation is welcome, but Colleges can provide so much more for adults.

# APPENDIX

## Centres of Vocational Excellence in further education: The way ahead

### The Policy Framework

#### Aim

CoVE will develop new, and enhance, existing, excellent vocational provision which is focused on meeting the skill needs of employers, nationally, sectorally, regionally and locally. They will seek to give a greater number of individuals from all backgrounds access to the high-quality vocational training which they need to succeed in a modern economy.

#### Objectives

- To ensure half of all general FE colleges in England have at least one CoVE by 2003-2004
- To increase active employer/college engagement to underpin, develop and strengthen innovative and flexible approaches to meeting the nation's current and future skills needs
- To secure enhanced vocational learning opportunities for all learners in FE, and 14-19 in schools, with a key focus on developing employability and career prospects, particularly for those from disadvantaged groups
- To encourage collaboration among providers and to promote the concept of excellence in economically important vocational specialisms.

#### Eligibility

CoVEs are open to FE, Tertiary and Specialist Colleges of Agriculture, Horticulture, Art & Design, Performing Arts and the Council funded FE provision in HE.

*(The LSC are looking at how possible wider eligibility might be achieved. This could include non-FE Providers and Sixth Form Colleges.)*

#### What a Centre of Vocational Excellence will do

- The CoVEs will be key drivers in enhancing the FE sector's contribution to meeting current and future skill needs by:
  - Enhancing the employability of new entrants
  - Developing the skills of those already in work

- Enhancing the employment prospects of those seeking work
- They will develop to a point where their focus will be on level 3 with clear progression routes to level 4 or work.
- They will develop strategies to meet the needs of all learners and support them to reach their full potential.
- They will work closely with business and industry to tackle skill issues, invest in workforce development, embed a culture of innovation and technical excellence, and develop the up-to-date knowledge and skills of teaching staff.
- Develop flexible learning opportunities to meet both learners' and employers' needs
- Develop strategies to promote access and participation by groups that have been traditionally excluded from learning or disadvantaged in the labour market.

CoVEs will be expected to work closely with key partners and can only be established with the support of local LSCs.

#### Providing high quality learning

CoVEs will be expected to:

- Deploy a first-rate teaching staff
- Show a commitment to staff development
- Ensure that staff have or develop the skills needed for working with disadvantaged groups
- Provide extra support for learning; this could include support for basic, key and study skills.

#### Resources for learning

CoVEs will need to have or have access to:

- Sufficient up-to-date industry-standard equipment
- A learning environment that meets learners' needs (especially those of excluded groups)
- Facilities to include: high quality learning materials, careers advice, ICT and Internet

#### Seamless Progression

- The initial learning experience must take account of the differing needs and histories of the learners. It will involve effective initial assessment and individual learning plans
- Colleges will be expected to demonstrate how

- they will broaden the base of participation in learning
- There must be strong links with other learning providers
- Links in ICT will be especially important
- The learning organisation should be able to offer pathways to Foundation Degrees, Honours degrees and postgraduate work.

### Specialisation

Specialisms to embed a culture of innovation and technical excellence will focus on one or more of the skill needs of:

- The local labour market
- Sub-regional and regional labour markets
- Specific sector, occupational, or group of related occupations at the national level.

### Transferring good practice

CoVEs will be expected to share their experience actively across their own college, in other colleges, across the wider FE sector and throughout the provider community as a whole. They will work with the LSC and LLSCs to ensure that the transfer of good practice is managed in a strategic and coherent fashion.

### Implementing CoVEs

Detailed arrangements for the implementation of the CoVE programme are to be published in September 2001. The key elements will be:

#### *Application*

- Applications to develop a CoVE will need to be submitted by December 2001
- Application will be based on a self-assessment and analysis of current position against a range of performance criteria
- A development plan will need to be worked up with potential partners and other providers
- Colleges will need endorsement from the Local LSC
- Decisions will be made in early 2002, with the main network to start from April 2002

### Pathfinder Centres / Support for the application process

- There will be a series of conferences in the Autumn (The Learning and Skills Council has been asked to plan/organise these)

- The Learning and Skills Council has been asked to facilitate the longer-term support role for the Pathfinders and co-ordinate the transfer of good practice from the Pathfinders to the main network.

### Funding and recognition approach

- There will be £100 million to support the initiative
- Strategy will be focussed on supporting colleges to deliver approved development plans
- CoVE status will be granted when a college has delivered its development plan and is operating at the necessary level of performance (the precise time will vary)
- In the longer term, CoVE status will depend on continued high levels of performance. Ofsted/ ALI will develop arrangements for recognition and re-recognition.

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## Acknowledgements

Lewisham College  
Bradford College  
Lancaster & Morecambe College  
Warwickshire College  
Sparsholt College  
Learning and Skills Development Agency

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Published by  
NIACE  
21 De Montfort Street  
Leicester LE1 7GE

NIACE, the national organisation for adult learning, has a broad remit to promote lifelong opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient financial resources.

Registered charity number: 1002775

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Typeset by Boldface  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Russell Press, Nottingham