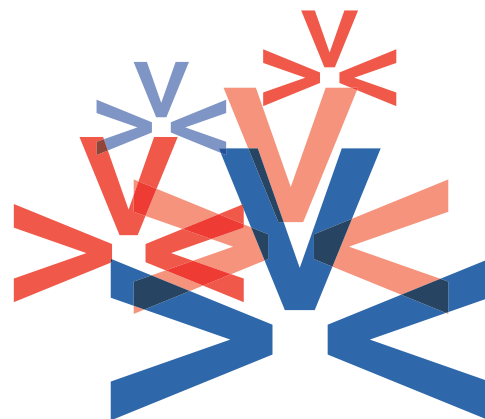


Measuring Progress: The Impact of the Centres of Vocational Excellence Programme



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Report Summary

1

GHK Consulting Ltd was commissioned in November 2002 to undertake the second phase of the evaluation of the Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) programme. The programme forms part of the government's strategy to modernise the role that colleges and work based learning providers play in the national economy, by creating a network of Centres of Vocational Excellence to develop new, and enhance existing, high quality provision to meet the skills needs of employers.

2

This report describes the progress of a sample of CoVEs towards the achievement of the eight desired programme outcomes listed in table 1, and comments on how CoVEs are measuring their progress towards each. The report also describes a series of future success factors identified by the CoVEs themselves, and makes recommendations, to CoVEs and the LSC, on areas which would benefit from further development.

3

A summary of the progress made towards the desired programme outcomes is shown in table 2.

4

In describing CoVEs' achievements and progress to date, the report describes a series of common approaches and challenges which have the potential to influence progress towards the desired programme outcomes.

5

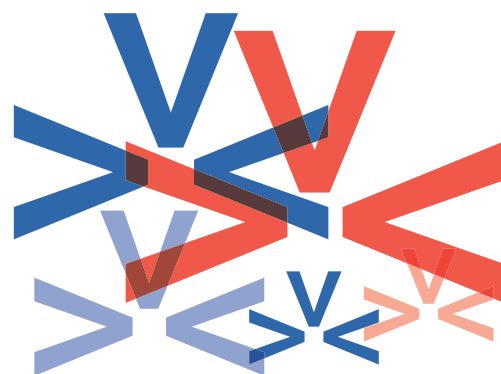
The report also describes a series of future success factors identified by the CoVEs themselves, including: maintaining the quality of provision across the programme; continued collaborative working between CoVEs and other stakeholders; the ability to recruit, retain and continuously develop high quality staff; and the effective promotion and marketing of the CoVE programme and CoVEs both locally and nationally.

Aim 1	A significant expansion in vocational learning, particularly at Level 3, in terms of overall volumes and participation rates as measured against aims for expansion of vocational Level 3 identified in development plan.
Aim 2	Increased effectiveness in addressing skills priorities through CoVEs, particularly in being responsive to the needs of employers.
Aim 3	An improvement in learners' achievements in Level 3 provision, including progression into employment and advancement within employment.
Aim 4	Widening participation of non-typical learners in Level 3 vocational qualifications and the participation of adults as a result of the CoVE programme.
Aim 5	A significant increase in the extent of collaboration amongst learning providers and the promotion of the concept of excellence and continuous improvement in economically important vocational specialisms.
Aim 6	An expansion of the use of industry standard equipment and facilities in the post-16 sector, including leverage of greater employer contributions to enhance provision.
Aim 7	Examples of innovation and flexibility in order to meet the needs of employers.
Aim 8	A positive change in the attitude of employers and involvement in training as a result of the quality of post-16 provision and the impact on meeting the skills needs of the workforce.

Table 1: The eight key desired programme outcomes for evaluation of the CoVE programme

Table 2: Summary of progress towards the eight key desired programme outcomes

Desired programme outcome	Summary
1 Expansion in vocational learning, particularly at Level 3	Eighty-one percent of the sampled CoVEs described forecast or actual increases in learner numbers at Level 3 – with 9 of the 11 FE pathfinders describing actual increases. Where increases were not forecast, negative developments in the target sector were given as the reason.
2 Increased effectiveness in addressing skills priorities	The majority of employers reported high levels of satisfaction with the services provided by the CoVEs. However, only two of the ten employers interviewed were sure that their take-up of CoVE services would increase. The influence of other factors such as market conditions and technological developments would have equal influence to the availability of relevant high quality provision.
3 Improved learner achievement at Level 3	CoVEs were optimistic about their potential for improving achievement and progression outcomes, with 20 of the 32 CoVEs sampled forecasting increases in achievement.
4 Widening participation at Level 3	All case study CoVEs were optimistic about widening participation in the future. CoVEs unanimously described plans to widen participation.
5 Increase in collaboration amongst learning providers, and the promotion of good quality provision	The level of collaboration with other providers had increased as a result of the programme, with a range of benefits already realised and more expected. The specialist development groups facilitated by the Learning and Skills Development Agency had been influential, and CoVEs had developed other partnerships to assist the enhancement and expansion of existing provision.
6 Expansion of use of industry standard equipment and facilities	CoVE funding and enhanced employer and industry relations guided investment decisions and offered opportunities for significant cost savings. ICT was a common investment focus, and impressive partnerships with global market leaders had been established which would be exploited further.
7 Innovation and flexibility in meeting employer needs	Employers believed that CoVEs are clearly improving their ability to accommodate employer needs in terms of course provision and delivery. CoVEs described many 'new' elements in their service offers. Increased flexibility of provision was also a common theme, to meet both employer and individual needs and featuring more on-line learning opportunities, flexible timetables and study locations and enhanced outreach work.
8 Positive change in employer attitudes to post-16 provision	There is evidence that employer attitudes are improving – with the majority describing their opinions as either improved or unchanged from a previously high opinion.



Key considerations

6

The following factors should be considered when interpreting the findings of the study:

- The sample comprised CoVEs which had joined early in the programme and were still in the early stages of development. Consequently, CoVEs were more able to describe progress towards some of the desired outcomes than others.
- In some cases, CoVEs have provided forecasts of progress, as actual data were unavailable at the time of the study. While the forecasts are aspirational, evidence from the FE pathfinders suggests many will be realised.

7

A number of the recommendations made in this report have since been addressed in further rounds of the programme.

Conclusions

8

Significant progress has already been achieved in terms of acquiring new equipment and facilities and developing provision.

9

The CoVEs were, on the whole, able to describe progress against each of the eight desired programme outcomes, as summarised in table 2. While some of the progress was forecast rather than actual, evidence from the pathfinder CoVEs suggests that most will be realised.

10

Overall, the aims of raising the standards of vocational learning and increasing the relevance of provision to employers and industry have been embraced by providers.

11

The extent to which progress towards the different desired programme outcomes has been achieved varied between CoVEs, as would be expected given their different development stages and trajectories.

12

Evidencing progress towards some of the eight desired programme outcomes at this early stage was a challenge for some CoVEs. However, the CoVEs envisaged few difficulties in providing such evidence in future, and described a range of approaches to collecting evidence against the milestones in their development plans.

13

CoVEs were aware of the need to ensure their sustainability, and were broadly optimistic that this would be achieved. This optimism can only be tested over time, and will depend partly on the quality of CoVEs' prior assessments of demand for their services.

Recommendations

14

A series of recommendations were made to CoVEs and the LSC, focussing on:

Programme focus – The LSC is recommended to maintain the emphasis on the development of high quality, employer focused provision;

Partners and partnerships – CoVEs are recommended to further develop relationships with Business Link and Chambers of Commerce networks; Sector Skills Councils and Regional Development Agencies;

Promotion and dissemination – It is recommended that the LSC promotes the CoVE programme more actively to employers, learners and other stakeholders and facilitates the dissemination of good practice material. It is also recommended that CoVEs further develop effective ways of transferring good practice across the post-16 sector;

Engaging employers – CoVEs are recommended to further develop their engagement with and responsiveness to employers;

Identifying need, strategy and linkage – The LSC is recommended to produce guidance on the labour market information available to CoVEs and enable its local offices to take the lead in consolidating existing local, regional and sectoral labour market information and relevant skills strategies, to inform the development of the CoVE programme. Providers developing CoVE proposals are recommended to involve stakeholders and employers in the very early development of CoVE proposals;

Widening participation – CoVEs are recommended to further develop strategies for widening participation and methods of evidencing progress towards widening participation;
Sustainability – It is recommended that greater prominence is given in LSC documentation to the need for each CoVE to consider its sustainability. CoVEs are recommended to include development of sustainability in good practice material.

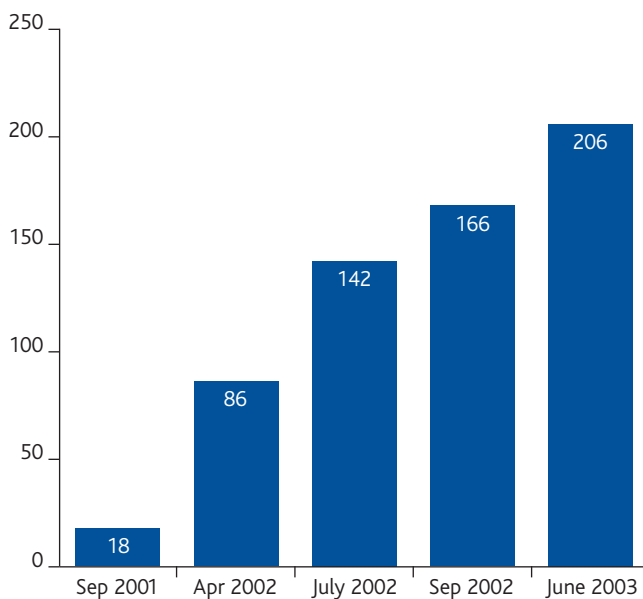


Figure 1: Growth of the CoVE programme

Full Report

Background to the CoVE programme

¹⁵ The CoVE programme is one component of the LSC’s strategy to meet the needs of employers locally, regionally, nationally and sectorally. It also seeks to give more people from all backgrounds access to the high quality, vocational training that they need to succeed in a modern economy, and to spread good practice throughout the post-16 training sector.

¹⁶ The programme contributes to all of the LSC national objectives and aims to:

- extend participation in education, learning and training;
- increase engagement of employers in workforce development;
- raise achievement of young people;
- raise achievement of adults; and
- raise quality of education and training and user satisfaction.

¹⁷ The first 16 FE pathfinder CoVEs joined the programme in September 2001, with a commitment to ensure that half of all general FE colleges had at least one CoVE by 2003/4. In June 2002, the Council announced the extension of the CoVE programme beyond solely FE colleges.

¹⁸ In November 2002, the Department for Education and Skills announced that funding would be made available to enable the development of 400 CoVEs by 2006 (*Success for All: reforming further education and training*).

¹⁹ The programme has now grown to include 206 CoVEs, comprising 179 FE CoVEs and 27 extension CoVEs. Thus, the initial commitment to have a CoVE in at least half of FE colleges has been met well ahead of target. The growth of the programme is illustrated in figure 3 below.

²⁰ The growth of the programme is illustrated in figure 1 below. A timetable for the programme is outlined in annex C:

The background features a complex, abstract pattern of overlapping geometric shapes in various shades of blue and red. The shapes are primarily triangles and polygons, some solid and some semi-transparent, creating a layered, dynamic effect. The overall color palette is dominated by deep blues and rich reds, set against a lighter blue background.

Significant progress has
already been achieved in
terms of acquiring new
equipment and facilities
and developing provision

Introduction

²¹ GHK Consulting Ltd was commissioned to undertake a second phase evaluation of the Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) programme to provide an assessment of its progress towards the eight key desired programme outcomes and to provide advice on how impact can be evidenced for the purpose of future evaluations. The report was commissioned and began its work at a relatively early stage of the programme and this evaluation report should be read in that context.

²² This report presents the findings of the evaluation along with recommendations to CoVEs and the LSC and contains:

- an assessment of the overall impact of the CoVE programme;
- information on how CoVEs are developing and evidencing their progress.

²³ As the CoVE programme is a dynamic one, which has evolved since it was first introduced, a number of the issues raised by the early CoVEs included in the report have already been addressed.

Methodology

²⁴ Since the CoVE programme was first announced, the CoVE criteria, as detailed in LSC circular 02/08, have been developed into eight key desired programme outcomes for the purpose of programme evaluation. This study focuses on the progress made towards the achievement of the eight desired programme outcomes.

²⁵ Views and evidence were collected from a representative sample of 32 CoVEs (FE and non-FE pathfinder and round one CoVEs) and from relevant stakeholders and beneficiaries.

²⁶ The approach consisted of:

- a review of relevant documentation;
- interviews with a range of stakeholders, including representatives of the DfES, LSDA, SSDA, SSC, RDAs, and the LSC. A full list of stakeholders contacted is attached at annex A;

- interviews with 10 case study Interim CoVEs¹ and a selection of relevant stakeholders, beneficiaries and local LSC representatives;
- interviews with 10 employers from seven sectors; and
- a telephone survey of 22 Interim CoVEs (seven FE pathfinders, one extension pathfinder, four round one extension CoVEs and 10 round one FE CoVEs).

A list of the CoVEs contacted during this study is included at annex B.

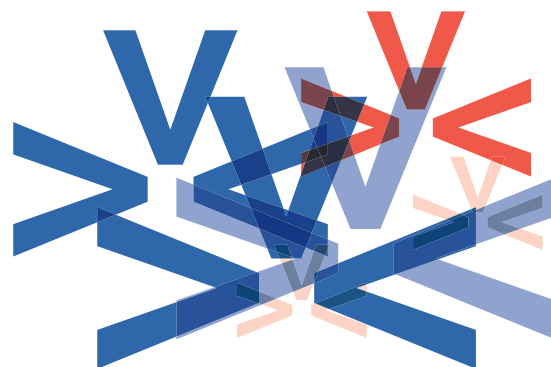
Key Considerations

²⁷ A number of factors should be considered when interpreting the findings of the study, although steps were taken to minimise their effects wherever possible:

- Different CoVEs were at different stages of development – FE pathfinders approaching assessment for full CoVE² status while the others were still in their development year. This means that both forecast/expected and actual impacts achieved were considered in assessment. In addition, as CoVEs entered the programme at different times in the academic year, their provision is at different stages, influencing the availability of data.
- Different experiences across the sample – as the programme has developed over time, procedures have been modified in response to feedback from the CoVEs. Consequently, CoVEs will have had different experiences depending on the round at which they joined the programme, including receiving different inputs and support from their local LSC and access to advice from other CoVEs – both of which are likely to influence impacts achieved.
- Nature of the sample – all the CoVEs in the sample joined the programme during the early rounds so the sample may not be representative of the wider network as it expands to reach the target of 400.
- Pathfinder CoVEs included in the sample already have high rates of learner achievement, limiting the extent to which they are able to demonstrate improvement in this area. Consequently, progress may be more readily apparent towards other desired programme outcomes.
- Attribution of impact – changes in the local context in which a CoVE operates will influence its progress towards the

¹ An Interim CoVE is a CoVE in the development phase immediately following acceptance of its full CoVE proposal (usually up to 12 months)

² Full CoVE status is awarded following successful assessment at the end of the development phase.



desired programme outcomes. For example, contraction or growth of a large employer could have a significant impact on learner numbers, and the ability to widen participation depends on the demographic and socio-economic composition of the CoVE's catchment area. In addition, as many providers are involved in a number of other initiatives, isolating the impacts of CoVE measures from those of other projects may be difficult.

- Differences in impact across desired programme outcomes – it is to be expected that different CoVEs will progress towards achieving individual desired programme outcomes in different ways and at different speeds.
- Progress towards some of the desired outcomes can be expected to show evidence of impact earlier than others, for example, increased participation and success rates are likely to be evident before a positive change in employer attitude. However, it should be noted that for longer courses it could be two years before meaningful data is available.
- to secure enhanced vocational learning opportunities for all learners in the post-16 sector, with a focus on developing employability and career prospects, particularly for those from disadvantaged groups; and
- to encourage collaboration amongst providers and promote the concept of excellence in economically important vocational specialisms.

30

To achieve these objectives, a network of CoVEs is being created through a number of successive rounds, as previously described.

Aim of the Programme

28

The CoVE desired programme outcomes to develop new, and enhance existing, high quality vocational provision to meet the skills needs of employers nationally, sectorally, regionally and locally. In addition, the network supports widening participation by offering more individuals from all backgrounds access to the high quality vocational training that can improve their prospects in a modern economy.

Objectives of the CoVE programme

29

The programme has four central objectives. These are:

- to establish 400 Centres of Vocational Excellence in the further education and training sector by 2006 which, as a network, create a strategic distribution of high quality centres that takes account of local, regional, sectoral and national needs;
- to increase and strengthen active employer/provider engagement to underpin, develop and strengthen innovative and flexible approaches to meeting employers' current and future skills needs;

Progress towards CoVE desired programme outcomes

Progress towards desired programme outcome 1

Desired programme outcome 1:

A significant expansion in vocational learning, particularly at Level 3, in terms of overall volume and participation rates

Eighty-one percent of the sampled CoVEs described forecast or actual increases in learner numbers at Level 3 – with 9 of the 11 FE pathfinders describing actual increases.

31

Twenty-six of the 32 CoVEs described or forecast increases in the number of Level 3 learners during the development year and beyond:

- nine of the 11 FE pathfinders described actual increases in Level 3 learners;
- two of the 11 FE pathfinders were maintaining existing learner numbers;
- seventeen of the 21 Interim CoVEs expected to increase Level 3 learners; and
- four of the 21 Interim CoVEs did not expect to increase Level 3 learners, of these:
 - one expected to maintain existing learner numbers;
 - two forecast fluctuations; and
 - one CoVE forecast a slight decline as a result of market forces, but did expect numbers to recover.

32

The effectiveness of CoVEs' attempts to expand learner numbers had been influenced by a range of contextual issues, including:

- **Legislative changes within sectors** – for example, the introduction of the Care Standards Act 2000, which is expected to be a significant driver of learning in the care sector (although the extent to which it will stimulate Level 3 learning is unknown);
- **Nature of CoVE development plans** – and the scheduling of measures to directly influence learner numbers. In some cases, FE CoVEs were involved in existing large-scale development activity which influenced the timing of additional provision; and
- **Local sectoral issues** – in particular, the health of the target sector. It was noticed that CoVEs which reported or forecast static learner numbers referred to negative developments in

the target sectors. For example, the recent downturn in the aeronautical industry has impacted on those CoVEs serving this and closely related industries. In such cases, maintenance of learner numbers may be an achievement in itself. In addition, the extent to which the target sector locally has a culture and tradition of work based learning will influence CoVEs' abilities to expand in their local areas – and strategies to change such a culture would be valid components in CoVE development plans.

33

The CoVEs raised two concerns regarding the ability of the programme to maintain the upward trend in learner numbers. These were:


- that CoVE status may be less attractive to employers in the future as the programme grows and CoVE status becomes more commonplace and 'less special'. This concern can be countered by ensuring that the good reputation of the CoVE programme is maintained and well communicated; and
- that CoVEs will not be able to expand without significant displacement effects on other local or regional providers – eight of the 32 CoVEs either reported or forecast an extension in their catchment areas as part of efforts to increase learner numbers.

Progress towards desired programme outcome 2

Desired programme outcome 2:

Increased effectiveness in addressing skills priorities through CoVEs, particularly in being responsive to employer needs

The majority of employers reported high levels of satisfaction with the services provided by the CoVEs. However, only two of the ten employers interviewed were sure that their take-up of CoVE services would increase. The influence of other factors such as market conditions and technological developments would have equal influence to the availability of relevant high quality provision.

The background consists of various overlapping geometric shapes in shades of blue and red. The shapes include triangles, rectangles, and irregular polygons, some of which are semi-transparent, creating a layered effect. The overall composition is abstract and modern.

...the initial commitment to have a CoVE in at least half of FE colleges has been met well ahead of target

34

The ability of CoVEs to meet the skills needs of employers is key to their individual and collective success. However, the identification and tracking of changes in skills needs pose specific challenges, with CoVEs employing a range of approaches to achieve them. This is an area in which local LSC involvement could be developed, guiding appropriate use of labour market information (LMI) and facilitating local strategic positioning.

Engaging with employers

35

It is clear that effective employer engagement can produce significant benefits for both employers and providers. The engagement of CoVEs with employers was substantial, and was certainly the most frequently used mechanism for addressing skills priorities. A number of ways of engaging employers were being used by the 32 CoVEs in the sample. For example:

- twenty-three CoVEs used employer forums for networking and informing course development;
- thirteen CoVEs engaged directly with individual employers;
- eight CoVEs had employers represented on their CoVE steering group;
- five CoVEs were involved in networking through local sectoral partnerships and local regeneration partnerships; and
- four CoVEs had business breakfasts with employers.

36

While the methods of engagement with employers were variable, employers were the most common information source. Contact with stakeholders most often occurred once interim CoVE status was received, with the opportunity for early formative inputs being missed.

37

The benefits of employer engagement were felt to be:

- increased employer contribution to curriculum and course design;
- development of course delivery methods and format that were more effective for employers; and
- targeted marketing of the CoVE to its employers.

38

Employers involved in provision development felt that CoVEs were highly capable of meeting employer as well as wider industry needs. Two stated that, despite the starting point of existing good quality and flexible provision, their providers had managed to become more open to employer needs. The greater flexibility and responsiveness was illustrated by the fact that, *'the (college) department no longer takes the attitude that "this is what we've got to offer", as there is more eagerness on their part to develop relevant programmes and new approaches to the delivery of provision in partnership with employers for instance through e-learning, e-portfolios and distance learning'*.

Use of local skills strategies and labour market information

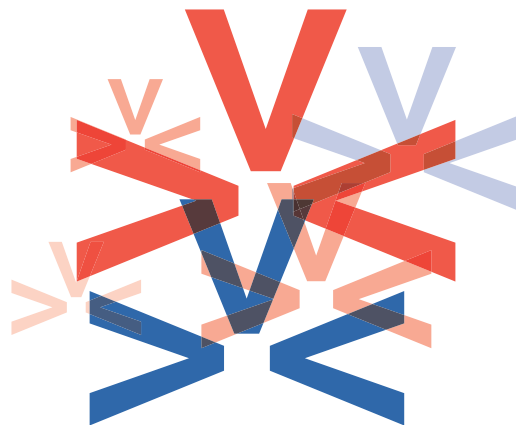
39

Sampled CoVEs made only limited reference to local LSC skills strategies when drawing up their initial proposals and development plans as local LSC strategic plans were finalised at the same time that the round one CoVEs received Interim CoVE status. Consequently, the influence of local LSC skills strategies should be more apparent from round two. The process of strategic area reviews will also assist in ensuring 'strategic fit' at the local level.

40

The use of LMI in targeting provision was also limited amongst the CoVE sample: just one of the 10 case study CoVEs described making use of LMI in the production of its development plan, and this seemed to be general in nature and referred to high staff turnover rates and recruitment issues in the target sector. Another CoVE described using a skills needs analysis for information and communication technology (ICT) skills carried out by a national training organisation (NTO). However, it should be noted that the CoVEs involved in this study prepared their development plans prior to the publication of frameworks for regional employment and skills action (FRESAs)³.

3 The first FRESAs were launched in Autumn 2002



41

It is clear that greater opportunities exist for increasing the use of LMI by CoVEs, especially in the development of proposals. Local LSCs have a key role here, in marshalling relevant local information. However, as discussed below, they and other stakeholders can also play a key role in terms of ensuring the 'strategic fit' for CoVEs as well as ensuring their provision remains relevant.

42

Local LSCs are supporting CoVEs' abilities to address employer and industry needs by:

- raising awareness that the CoVE programme is primarily about filling skills gaps and being responsive to employer needs rather than about recognising excellence; and
- sharing local skills priorities with providers – based on local LSC strategies and often mapped against regional development agencies' (RDAs) regional economic strategies, FRESAs, LMI and local sector priorities.

Engaging with Regional Development Agencies

43

Only three CoVEs reported any significant engagement with their RDA and just one referred to its area of specialism being a recognised RDA priority area. It appears that RDAs have a variable degree of interest in the CoVE programme with some RDAs better at engaging with CoVEs in their area than others. Many CoVEs stated that they found it difficult to engage RDAs, and that offers of presentations to RDAs were not always taken up. However, it is envisaged that RDA engagement will be facilitated by the LSC.

Contacts with NTOs/SSCs, Business Links and Chambers of Commerce

44

Fifty six percent of the CoVE sample described contacts with the relevant NTOs/SSCs⁴ – corresponding to nine of the 17 vocational areas covered by the CoVE sample. Overall, contacts were viewed as positive and mutually beneficial, with the prime driver for increased engagement being a combination of increased NTO/SSC awareness of the programme and the acknowledgement from CoVEs that such engagement was important to their ability to meet industry skills needs.

45

Engagement with NTOs/SSCs was usually limited during the production of CoVE development plans, becoming more frequent during the development phase. According to one SSC representative *'the SSC will work more and more closely with CoVE X in the future, to ensure qualifications and curricula developed are relevant and effective in meeting employers' needs'*. Commenting on the impact of a provider's recent CoVE status another representative stated that, *'College Y's CoVE status has made other organisations look up and see what it is doing'*. Where the NTO/SSC had collaborated with the CoVE on product development, such as the production of sectoral promotional material, the NTO/SSC expressed satisfaction with the product and stated that the material had been extremely well received.

46


Engagement with Business Links and Chambers of Commerce was more limited, with only six CoVEs mentioning contacts with their local Business Links, and only two having collaborated with Chambers of Commerce. One reason for the limited engagement appeared to have been previous or existing competition between CoVEs and the two organisations. According to one CoVE, previous competition with the local Chamber had prevented the referral of learners to the provider, although this was now changing. In another case, a CoVE described having to negotiate hard with their Business Link to persuade it to continue to provide business advice from a new CoVE-based business support unit, again due to the threat of competition for employers in the given vocational area.

Progress towards desired programme outcome 3

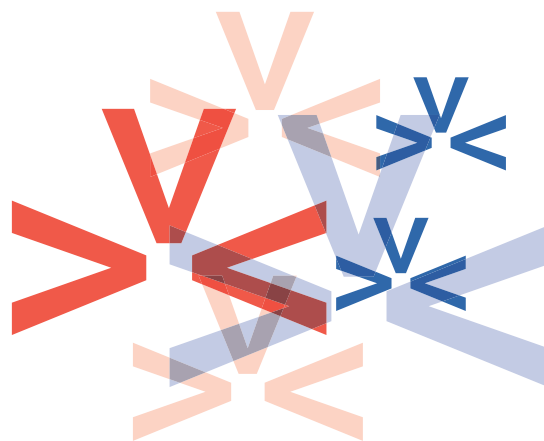
**Desired programme outcome 3:
Improvement in learners' achievements in vocational Level 3 provision, including progression into employment and advancement within employment**

CoVEs were optimistic about their potential for improving achievement and progression outcomes, with 20 of the 32 CoVEs sampled forecasting increases in achievement.

⁴ It should be noted that vocational areas in which no NTO/SSC involvement was reported tended to be areas in which no NTO/SSC existed.

The background consists of a complex, abstract pattern of overlapping geometric shapes. The primary colors are various shades of blue, ranging from light sky blue to deep navy blue, and a range of reds, from dark maroon to bright, almost white-red. The shapes are mostly triangles, quadrilaterals, and irregular polygons, some of which are semi-transparent, creating a layered, dynamic effect. The overall composition is non-representational and modern.

‘there is more eagerness on
[the college’s] part to
develop relevant programmes
and new approaches...’



47

Twenty of the 32 CoVEs forecast⁵ increases in achievement during the development period and/or afterwards. Of the remaining CoVEs, eight expected to maintain existing very high levels of achievement, and four were unable to predict with confidence.

48

Of the 11 FE pathfinder CoVEs, three reported an increase in achievement rates. The remaining eight reported maintaining the excellent achievement rates they already had prior to joining the programme.

Progression

49

It should be noted that the tracking of learners into employment was an area found challenging by CoVEs. Consequently, few of the CoVEs had data of progression into employment.

50

Twenty-six of the 32 CoVEs forecast an increase in progression into further training, with 14 CoVEs forecasting increased progression into HE. Five had learners entering the CoVE at Levels 1 and 2 with a view to progressing to Level 3, and four had learners entering at Level 3. Two CoVEs forecast increased progression into employment, the low number reflecting the lack of baseline data.

51

Extension CoVEs may not need to undertake as much work to develop progression into employment as their learners are already employed – although this emphasises the importance of assessing the degree to which advancement within employment is attributable to CoVE training.

52

There was little monitoring of advancement within employment. However, some CoVEs were involved in promotional events which enabled employers and learners to meet, and others were working with Jobcentre Plus to improve the employability of the unemployed.

Progress towards desired programme outcome 4

Desired programme outcome 4: Widening participation of non-typical learners in vocational Level 3 qualifications and the participation of adults

All case study CoVEs were optimistic about widening participation in the future. CoVEs unanimously described plans to widen participation.

53

All case study CoVEs were optimistic about widening participation in the future, with:

- five of the 10 case study CoVEs forecasting an increase in the number of ethnic minority learners;
- four forecasting an increase in male learners in a traditionally female vocational area or in female learners in a traditionally male vocational area; and
- four forecasting an increase in other non-traditional learners like disabled learners, asylum seekers and learners with special needs.

54

The extent to which widening participation had occurred to date is limited, and not necessarily attributable solely to changes made by the CoVEs. Two FE pathfinders had experienced an increase in the number of ethnic minority learners and two others had experienced an increase in female learners in a traditionally male vocational area and male learners in a female vocational area.

55

Only the case study CoVEs were asked about specific approaches to widening participation, and while measures had been taken to counter gender and ethnic imbalances in learner profile, few measures appeared to have been taken to widen participation to include the low or unskilled sections of the labour market or the unemployed. For example, only one case study CoVE mentioned collaborating with Jobcentre Plus on promoting employability and training uptake by the unemployed although others included basic skills provision as part of their 'offer' to learners.

⁵ At the time of the study, achievement data were not available.

56

It is possible that the limited progress in widening participation at Level 3 resulted from the focusing of efforts on support and recruitment activities at lower levels of provision. There was a perception amongst CoVEs that widening participation measures fit more naturally at levels below Level 3. According to one CoVE *'trying to widen participation at Level 3 is too late, as the kind of learners who fall under the widening participation agenda are not found at Level 3'*. Consequently, CoVEs can still be optimistic when forecasting widening participation at Level 3, as the impact of measures at lower levels progress through the training system.

57

It is also possible that progress in widening participation is limited because attention has been focused on improving the quality of provision in other ways during the early stages of the programme. While CoVEs had spent considerable money and effort on purchasing new equipment and developing new courses, fewer measures had been taken to boost learner support.

Progress towards desired programme outcome 5

Desired programme outcome 5:

A significant increase in the extent of collaboration amongst learning providers and the promotion of the concept of excellence and continuous improvement in economically important vocational specialisms

The level of collaboration with other providers had increased as a result of the programme, with a range of benefits already realised and more expected. The specialist development groups facilitated by the Learning and Skills Development Agency had been influential, and CoVEs had developed other partnerships to assist the enhancement and expansion of existing provision.

58

CoVEs found that their status generated a large amount of interest within the post-16 training and education sector, and that they were being contacted by many non-CoVEs for information and advice on good practice and developing proposals.

59

The programme had generated a beneficial increase in collaboration between CoVEs and other CoVE and non-CoVE providers. The organised collaborative forums, for example, the Specialist Development Groups and the extension pathfinder group had led to extensive inter-CoVE collaboration which extended beyond the facilitated events.

60

In general, CoVEs appreciated the benefits of collaborative activities, particularly the facilitated networking:

- the majority of the 32 CoVEs were very satisfied with the Specialist Development Groups. Two CoVEs were not convinced about the relevance of group activities to their work, and one of these had changed to a new, more relevant grouping; and
- the extension pathfinder Group appeared to be particularly successful, all the extension pathfinder CoVEs interviewed found it extremely useful and had continued to meet every four to six weeks. In particular, they found the sharing of experiences and the reinforcement that they were 'on track' very useful. They also found that membership of the group facilitated wider networking too.

61

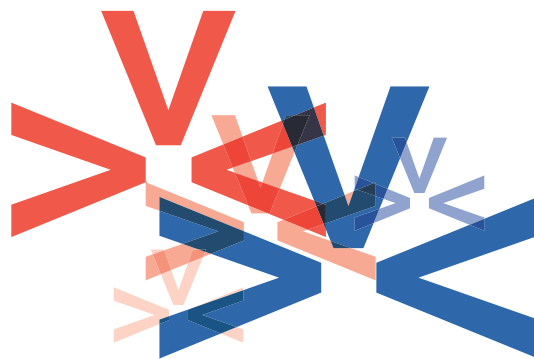
However, despite the benefits, some reservations were expressed as to whether the amount of time spent on these activities could possibly be to the detriment of the development of their CoVE in the future.

Progress towards desired programme outcome 6

Desired programme outcome 6:

Expansion in the use of industry standard equipment and facilities in the post-16 sector, including leverage and greater employer contributions to enhance provision

CoVE funding and enhanced employer and industry relations have guided investment decisions and offered opportunities for significant cost savings. ICT was a common investment focus, and impressive partnerships with global market leaders have been established which would be exploited further.



62

Employer involvement in the development of vocational provision ensures that industry relevant facilities and equipment are identified. However, CoVEs also work with equipment manufacturers to obtain the necessary equipment at reduced cost for mutual benefit. Three particularly significant examples include:

- two print suppliers made combined contributions totalling over £1 million to a print media CoVE on its establishment; and
- collaboration between an automotive CoVE and software companies enabled the CoVE to acquire £1 million software at half price, and to purchase other software for just 16% of the market value of £500,000.

63

The identification of industry standards, supported by CoVE capital funding has also supported the upgrading of equipment and facilities. In particular:

- new machinery and tools ranging from sophisticated CAD/CAM packages to sheep dips – (19 of the 32 CoVEs);
- new IT and multimedia equipment – (16 of the 32 CoVEs);
- construction of new and enhancement of existing accommodation – (16 of the 32 CoVEs);
- equipment for facilitating outreach provision – (three of the 32 CoVEs); and
- construction of specialised large-scale facilities (two of the 32 CoVEs).

64

Significant investments had also been made in IT and multimedia equipment in order to facilitate ICT-based course delivery and distance learning. The main benefits of these were:

- improvements in the quality of the content and mode and flexibility of learning;
- more relevant work experience for learners – as they became more familiar with industry standard equipment; and
- increased ability of CoVEs to attract new employer clients based on the equipment available. Learners were often able to identify that new equipment and facilities and cutting-edge IT equipment made a big difference in terms of maintaining their interest in and promoting accessibility of learning.

65

While the experience of capital investment had generally been extremely positive, concerns were also expressed about the ability to maintain it over time. This is particularly the case in ICT, where technological change occurs so quickly that upgrades are frequently needed. In addition, a minority of CoVEs expressed the concern that the capital/revenue balance of their funding was not always ideal, as the CoVE may achieve even greater impact through enhanced revenue funding rather than higher capital funding.

Progress towards desired programme outcome 7

Desired programme outcome 7: Innovation and flexibility to meet employer needs

Employers believed that CoVEs are clearly improving their ability to accommodate employer needs in terms of course provision and delivery. CoVEs described many 'new' elements in their service offers. Increased flexibility of provision was also a common theme, to meet both employer and individual needs and featuring more online learning opportunities, flexible timetables and study locations and enhanced outreach work.

Innovation

66

Innovation was considered as covering two aspects:

- developing provision and delivery methods wholly new to the sector; and
- introducing approaches new to the college or provider.

67

The study did not look at the level of innovation within course content. However, it was evident that considerable activity around course design had taken place, and that CoVEs were aware of the need to offer bite-size and bespoke provision to meet employer demand. The extent to which this provision would be at full cost was not always clear, but some CoVEs were considering funding such provision from sources other than employer contributions, such as from industry bodies, SSCs or RDAs, particularly in the case of sectors dominated by small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs).

68

Some innovative use of ICT in tracking learner progress through a qualification was identified. For example, a system used by a major airline to track its staff experience and qualifications has been adapted by one CoVE to meet the needs of the construction industry. The system developed records information and evidence of progress towards qualifications and enables learners and staff to assess the percentage of qualification completed and to identify gaps in training and work experience. Once the qualification is completed, the information is put onto CD-ROM to enable the learner to present detailed evidence of their skills and experience to prospective employers.

Flexibility

69

Employers believed that CoVEs are clearly improving their ability to accommodate employer needs in terms of course provision and delivery.

70

The majority of employers were keen to see the post-16 training sector delivering more short, bite-size courses, tailor-made to their needs and delivered in a more flexible manner. This appears to make employers more willing to increase the take-up of learning and to pay for it. As one large employer described, *'CoVEs do not need to worry about the ability to fund all these short courses... because employers will pay as long as the courses are right'*. However, whether the same view applies to smaller employers is not clear.

Progress towards desired programme outcome 8

Desired programme outcome 8:

A positive change in attitude of employers to the quality of post-16 provision, and an impact on meeting the skills needs of the workforce

There is evidence that employer attitudes are improving – with the majority describing their opinions as either improved or unchanged from a previously high opinion.

71

Employers were pleased with the performance of the CoVE with which they were involved, with the majority describing their opinions as either improved or unchanged from a previously high opinion. However, despite high levels of satisfaction employers felt that a range of other contextual factors would influence the extent to which they used CoVE services more frequently than before. One employer expressed concern that the programme might improve services at the CoVEs without facilitating improved quality across the sector.

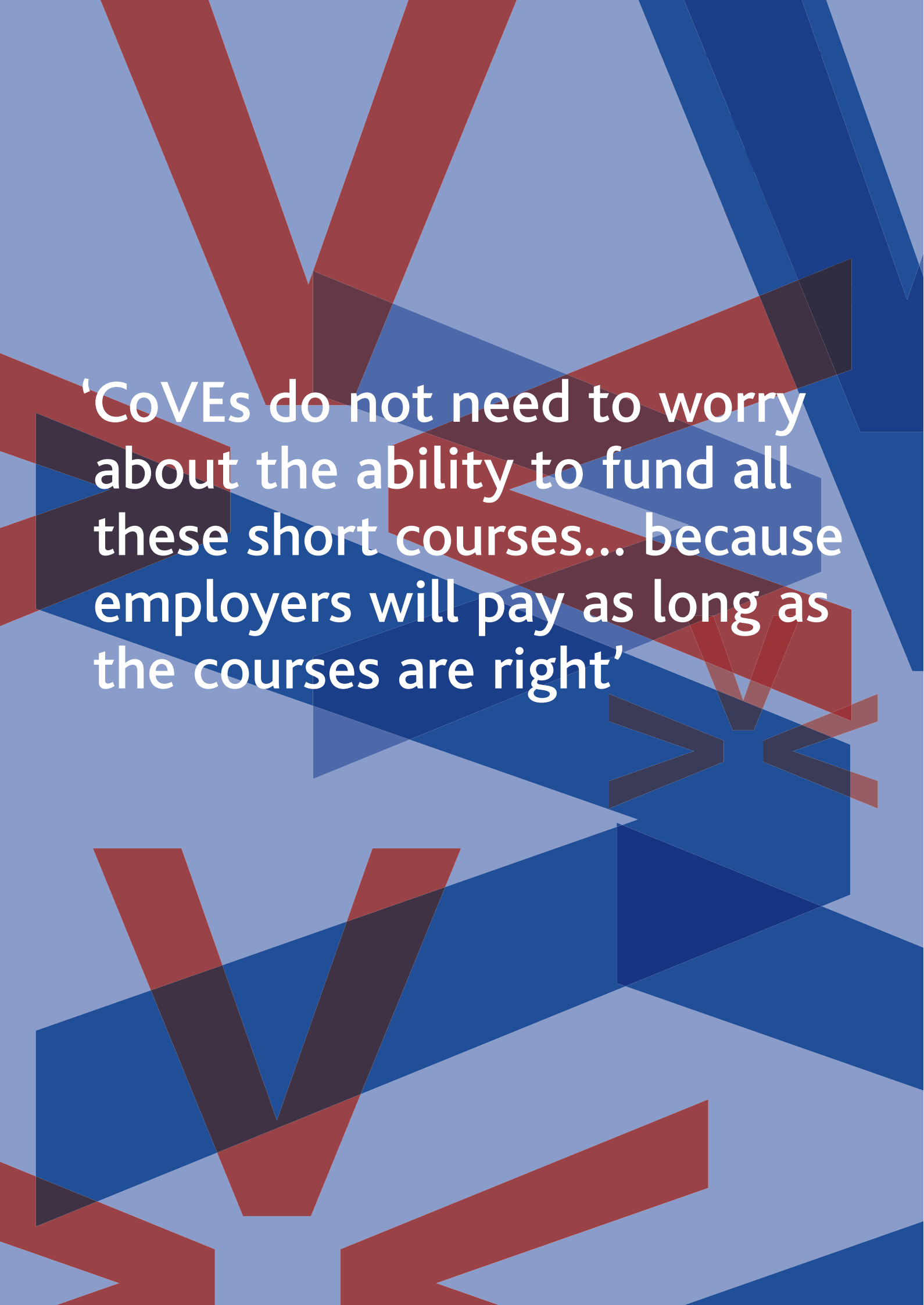
72

Case study CoVEs reported an increase in the number of employers contacting the CoVE for information about its provision. Other findings included:

- five of the case study CoVEs reported actual increases in the number of employers using their services;
- two of the FE pathfinders reported significant increases (75% and 92%), against low baselines of eight and 12 respectively (that is, six and 11 new employers);
- one extension pathfinder described an increase of 19%, against a previous baseline of 74 (that is, 14 new employers);
- two round one CoVEs described increases of 13% and 5%, against a baseline of 40 and 110 (five and 17 new employers);
- three CoVEs reported greater willingness of employers to give talks about the industry or specific aspects of provision and to attend provider events at which employers can meet learners;
- one FE pathfinder reported an increase in the number of placements accepted by employers. However, another commented on a shortage of employers willing to take on apprentices, and the reluctance among its employers to allow work release; and
- one FE pathfinder reported greater willingness of employers to offer premises for use by CoVE learners.

73

Five of the 32 CoVEs currently use satisfaction surveys to measure employer attitudes, and data for the CoVE development phase were not available at the time of the study. Many felt it to be too early to survey employers, particularly for extension pathfinder and round one CoVEs, as any difference they might recognise at this early stage would be likely to be marginal.



'CoVEs do not need to worry about the ability to fund all these short courses... because employers will pay as long as the courses are right'

Common challenges, issues and factors for future success

Common Challenges and Issues

74

During this study, a series of common challenges and issues around achieving and evidencing progress towards the key desired programme outcomes were identified. These are outlined in the following paragraphs.

Tracking learner progress

75

Evidencing learner progression following course completion was found particularly difficult by all CoVEs sampled. While eight out of the 10 case study CoVEs track learners' progress through their own provision, limited tracking of progress appeared to be taking place after completion. Only one case study CoVE made specific reference to data on learners' employment destination, while four CoVEs mentioned current efforts to improve their tracking and destination data systems to facilitate longer-term tracking.

76

In particular, evidencing progression of employed trainees was difficult. This rarely occurred amongst the sample CoVEs, with one expressing the view that it was the responsibility of employers. However, another CoVE was developing a system for tracking employee qualifications and experience which will enable the learner, CoVE staff and the learner's employer to review the qualifications completed, and identify gaps in learning and training. This requires further development if it is to enable full tracking.

Widening participation

77

Difficulty was experienced in evidencing steps taken to widen learner participation and the collection of data on learner characteristics. In some cases, limited amounts of data were being collected, preventing the assessment of efforts to widen participation for non-traditional learner groups. Only the case study CoVEs were asked for figures on widening participation, and while most recorded ethnic minority, gender and age details, just three of the 10 routinely recorded the characteristics such as disability or special needs. However, much of the data on widening participation is now being collected in the Individual Learner Record (ILR).

Employer Relationships

78

Despite positive findings regarding engagement with employers, CoVEs reported that engaging with employers, and particularly SMEs, remains a challenging area. This may be because employers:

- do not recognise the benefits of their inputs;
- may not have experience of collaborative work with colleges and training providers;
- are unaware of their own skills needs; or
- are unaware of wider competitive pressures that require skills-based responses.

79

Employers are unlikely to afford the time to contribute to steering and developmental CoVE meetings unless clear benefits can be seen. It is important that CoVEs acknowledge this and plan meetings accordingly. This is true whether engaging new employers, or expanding current employer engagement.

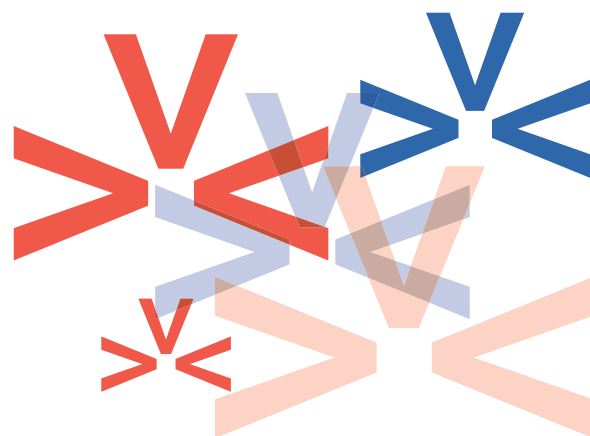
80

Many of the employers interviewed commented that the quality and accessibility were often more important than the cost when deciding to use provision. However, high quality provision does not necessarily lead to an expansion of training undertaken by employers, and efforts to stimulate demand must consider other commercial and competitiveness factors influencing target employers. Working with local agencies such as Business Link and Chambers of Commerce will help allow CoVEs to maximise their local market penetration, while realising significant benefits for local employers and individuals.

Identifying Need

81

CoVEs need to keep abreast of changes in demand at the sectoral level – a challenge, especially for CoVEs operating in highly specialist areas. It was clear that each of the stakeholders mentioned in this report had a significant role to play in identifying need and formulating responses. However, in the majority of cases their involvement had taken place after implementation of the CoVE development plan had begun. This is not to devalue their inputs or the future value of new relationships established, but rather to question what more could have been achieved if their inputs had been received from the outset.



82

The findings also suggest that while CoVEs may know their own employer base and current needs, the contribution of other stakeholders will be vital for future views and strategic positioning. Other stakeholders, such as SSCs, Business Links and RDAs, working with the local LSCs and CoVEs at the proposal stage, are probably best-placed to identify sectoral skill needs at the local level, and ensure that the activities of CoVEs fit with, and contribute towards, local and regional skills/economic development strategies. Local LSCs have a crucial role to play, as both users and providers of LMI and link points for local and regional strategies.

Sustainability

83

One of the key challenges for the continuation of the improvements and facilities supported by the programme is the preparation for future sustainability, which should be considered as early as possible in the planning and implementation processes.

84

The majority of CoVEs were aware of the need to ensure their continued sustainability once programme funding ceases. This was mainly a function of the volume of new business they expected to generate, although the value of working with manufacturers and suppliers was emphasised through examples of equipment provided free or at reduced cost.

85

CoVEs expressed the following concerns about the ability to maintain achievements in the future:

- maintenance and updating of sophisticated new equipment, especially ICT facilities, once CoVE funding ceases;
- a possible decline in the reputation of the programme. Many CoVEs and employers regarded the 'excellence stamp' as key to attracting new and existing employer interest. A reduction of this focus, and a perception of a drop in the quality of services as the programme expands, were perceived as potential risks to the achievement of the wider programme objectives. However, it should be noted that the quality of subsequent proposals has improved as a result of lessons learnt from the first round; and

- the ability to fund bite-size, bespoke provision that does not qualify for LSC funding and which small employers cannot afford. This is a particular problem in sectors dominated by micro and small and medium sized enterprises.

86

However, CoVEs were broadly optimistic about their future sustainability, given the increased interest among employers and the significant developmental activities that CoVE funding had facilitated. While a minority of round one CoVEs were, at the time of the study, still to make specific plans for ensuring sustainability (many still waiting to see the precise effect of current CoVE interventions), the majority of CoVEs from each round identified different ways by which their sustainability would be ensured. These included:

- the development of new course provision;
- enhancing and increasing collaboration with employers; and
- building on the commercial opportunities and contacts.

87

Given the importance of ensuring the sustainability of the CoVE achievements, it will be important to continue to stress the importance of forward planning, as well as communicate examples of good practice which can be duplicated elsewhere.

Future Success Factors

88

CoVEs were able to describe a range of approaches, successes and barriers in collecting evidence to support progress towards the achievement of their development plans and, in most cases, felt that evidencing progress against the desired programme outcomes would not be difficult, as they fitted well with the CoVE criteria, and their understanding of the objectives of the programme overall.

89

Although some of the desired outcomes will be best assessed at the national level, for example, desired programme outcome eight: positive change in employer attitudes to post-16 provision, CoVEs felt it important to know what their own employers thought of their provision and how it could be further developed.

90

However, a number of areas of potential weakness in evidencing progress were identified, although some were more a question of having developed other areas first, rather than serious failings. Areas identified as needing particular development were:

- learner progress once completing provision;
- progression within employment in particular; and
- widening participation.

91

It is important to ensure that monitoring systems are established to routinely collect the necessary performance information. The 'flagging' of CoVE provision on the ILR at learning aim level will be invaluable in ensuring the provision of useful learner data and will facilitate its analysis.

92

A number of factors were believed to be important to maintain the current benefits and to ensure the future success of the programme. In particular:

- maintaining quality – as stated earlier, the commitment to develop excellent provision was a key factor in attracting both existing and new employer clients;
- continued collaborative working – this will enable the embedding of benefits realised to date from partnership approaches, which are seen as essential for the continued ability to address skills needs as well as contributing to local and regional skills and economic development strategies;
- continuous development of high quality staff – the ability to recruit, retain and continuously develop the staff of the CoVE was seen as important in maintaining high quality provision, as well as confirming the CoVEs reputation within its particular sector; and
- promotion of the programme – enhanced promotion of the programme at local, regional, sectoral and national levels were considered essential to maintaining and increasing the demand for CoVE services. This should primarily be the joint responsibility of the LSC and CoVEs, although other local partners and national sector bodies also have key roles to play.

Recommendations

93

A number of recommendations are made to the LSC and to CoVEs, on areas which might benefit from further development. These focus on:

- programme focus;
- partners and partnerships;
- promotion and dissemination;
- engaging employers;
- identifying need, strategy and linkage;
- widening participation; and
- sustainability.

Programme Focus

94

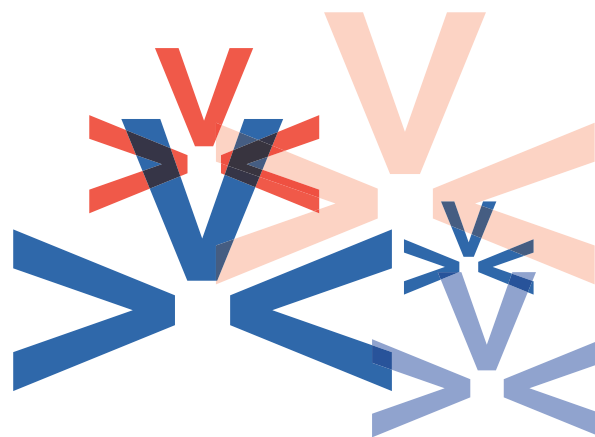
It is recommended that there continues to be an acknowledgement of the importance of developing high quality, employer-focused provision within the CoVE network, as this is a key driver of employer engagement.

Partners and Partnerships

95

While the CoVEs have taken significant strides to both extend and deepen their local partnerships, further development is still needed with regard to certain potential partners. It is recommended that CoVEs:

- develop, or enhance, relationships with the Business Link and Chambers of Commerce networks – both nationally and locally;
- develop, or enhance relationships with SSCs, particularly where there is little current involvement. This would be mutually beneficial, enabling CoVEs to access LMI, and through SSCs to influence provision for their sectors; and
- continue to develop the engagement with RDAs, facilitated through their local LSCs. It is recommended that engagement is developed both locally and through thematic groupings. It is key that CoVEs demonstrate how they can contribute towards regional skills and economic development objectives, as well as allowing strategic considerations to influence their conception and initial development.



Promotion and dissemination

96

It is recommended that the LSC:

- promotes the programme more actively to employers, learners and other stakeholders; and
- circulates good practice and 'good news' materials widely – to illustrate effective and replicable practice for CoVEs and local LSCs, and inform them and a wider audience of the successes of the programme to date.

97

It is recommended that CoVEs:

- further develop effective ways to disseminate and transfer good practice throughout the post-16 sector.

Engaging Employers

98

Local LSCs are now better able to steer aspirant CoVEs towards identified skills priorities. However, it will be important that this increased engagement takes place uniformly across the local LSC network, and is not confined to the more proactive areas.

99

It is recommended that CoVEs further develop:

- approaches described earlier, such as: involvement in employer forums, networking, involvement in management and individual contact;
- ways of working with and responding to employers in order to stimulate demand for CoVE provision; and
- effective ways of transferring good practice.

Identifying Need, Strategy and Linkage

100

It is recommended that the LSC:

- enables local offices to take a lead role in consolidating existing local, regional and sectoral LMI and relevant skills strategies, to inform future rounds of the programme as well as supporting current implementation. Here the strategic area review process can play a key role in ensuring local 'strategic fit'. However success will also rely on the extension of SSC contacts as vital information sources, as described above; and
- produces and circulates guidance on the range of external sources of information and advice, and the potential

benefits of using them. This could be a mix of nationally and locally produced information in both electronic and hard copy publication.

101

It is recommended that CoVEs:

- involve stakeholders at the initial planning and development stages.

Widening Participation

102

Widening participation within CoVEs is central to the achievement of the programme's inclusion objectives, but is also potentially an area of considerable challenge. It is recommended that:

- widening participation becomes a topic for inclusion in good practice materials produced by CoVEs;
- strategies for widening participation include targeting those learners with Levels 1 and 2 qualifications, but not currently progressing to Level 3; and
- tracking progress against widening participation impacts is monitored and evaluated by CoVEs and the LSC.

Sustainability

103

CoVEs are aware of the need to plan for sustainability, but are at different stages of development in this area. It is recommended that the LSC:

- gives greater prominence within proposal, guidance and other programme documentation to the need to consider sustainability – with a requirement for more rigorous assessment during proposal and full CoVE status assessments; and
- assesses progress towards sustainability as part of more qualitative monitoring processes.

104

It is recommended that CoVEs:

- include with good practice material, information on how sustainability can be addressed. Specific approaches to acquiring free or subsidised equipment, through employer and supplier contacts could be included in such guidance. However, the risk of over-reliance on sponsorship and the constraints of a finite 'market' should also be acknowledged.

Conclusions

105

The extent to which progress towards the different desired programme outcomes has been achieved varied between CoVEs, as would be expected given their different development stages and given that the study was undertaken at a time when some data were not yet available.

106

Evidencing progress towards some of the eight desired programme outcomes was a challenge for some CoVEs, due to appropriate data collection systems being in the early stages of development. However, the CoVEs envisaged few difficulties in providing such evidence in future, and described a range of approaches to collecting evidence against the milestones in their development plans.

107

Broadly, the CoVEs were able to describe a combination of forecast and actual achievements against each of the eight desired outcomes, as summarised in Table 2. While many of these forecasts remain aspirational, evidence from the FE pathfinder CoVEs, who have received full CoVE status on completion of their development year, suggests most will be realised.

108

Significant impact has already been achieved in terms of the provision of new equipment, facilities and provision, particularly considering that the programme is still in the early stages of development.

109

Overall, providers have embraced the joint aims of increasing the relevance of provision to employers and raising the standards of vocational training.

110

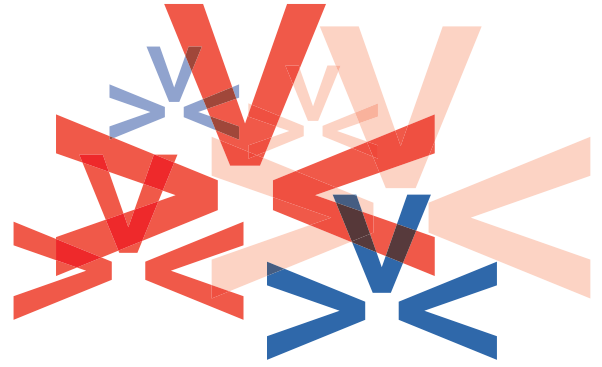
The majority of CoVEs were aware of the need to ensure their sustainability, and were broadly optimistic that this would be achieved. This optimism can only be tested over time, and will depend partly on the quality of CoVEs' prior assessments of demand for their services.

111

The majority of employers were highly satisfied with the services provided by the CoVEs, with employers believing that CoVEs are improving their ability to respond to employer needs in terms of course provision and delivery.

112

The study found evidence that employer attitudes are improving, potentially promoting a more positive attitude to post-16 provision generally.



Future evaluation

113

Future evaluation of the CoVE programme will include longitudinal evaluation of employer and stakeholder attitudes to and engagement with CoVEs and other post-16 vocational training providers along with regular analyses of performance data routinely collected by the LSC.

Annexes

Annex A: Stakeholders included in study

a) CoVE programme stakeholders interviewed

Organisation	Numbers
DfES	1
National LSC	1
Chairs of Local LSC Regional Groupings	3
Regional Development Agency	1
Learning and Skills Development Agency	1
Sector Skills Development Agency	1
Total	8

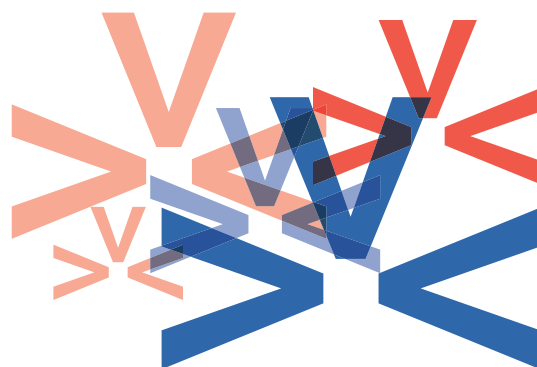
b) Individual CoVE stakeholders interviewed

Organisation	Numbers
Local LSC contact	9
DfES	1
NTO/SSC	2
Commercial contacts/equipment suppliers	2
Local council	1
Early Years Development Childcare Partnership	1
Town Centre Manager	1
Total	17

c) Employers interviewed about the CoVEs

Type and size of employer	Employee size ⁶	Numbers
Construction	Medium	1
Automotive	Large	1
Agriculture	Small	1
IT	Small	1
Health & social care	Large (2) Medium (1)	3
Borough Council	Large	1
Engineering	Large	2
Total		10

⁶ Small – 1-49 employees; Medium – 50-249 employees; Large – 250+ employees.



Annex B: CoVEs included in the study: local LSC, region and sector

Local LSC and Region	Number	Sector	Number
Birmingham & Solihull (WM)	3	Engineering	11
Bournemouth, Dorset & Poole (SW)	1	Hospitality & Catering	1
County Durham (NE)	1	Applied Science	1
Cumbria (NW)	1	Computing	1
Devon & Cornwall (SW)	1	Early Years & Childcare	2
Greater Manchester (NW)	1	Nautical Studies	1
Greater Merseyside (NW)	1	Land-based	2
Humberside (YH)	1	ICT for Business	2
Hampshire & the Isle of Wight (SE)	1	Digital Technology and New Media	1
Lancashire (NW)	5	Sport and Fitness	1
London Central (GL)	1	Construction	3
London East (GL)	2	Print Media & Skills	2
London West (GL)	1	Creative Industries	1
London South (GL)	2	Retail and distributive trades	1
Norfolk (ER)	1	Health & Social Care	1
Tyne & Wear (NE)	1	Uniformed and Non-uniformed Public Services	1
West Yorkshire (YH)	3		
Wiltshire & Swindon (SW)	1		
Somerset (SW)	2		
Staffordshire (WM)	1		
Surrey (SE)	1		
Total	32	Total	32

Annex C: CoVE Proposal rounds – Timetable

September 2001: FE pathfinder CoVEs
April 2002: Round 1: FE CoVEs
July 2002: Round 2 FE CoVEs and non-FE pathfinder
CoVEs
September 2002: Round 1 non-FE CoVEs
June 2003: Round 3 CoVEs (FE and non-FE)
Spring 2004: Round 5
Spring 2005: Round 6

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