

Alexandra House  
33 Kingsway  
London  
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404045  
F 020 7421 6855  
[www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)



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Mr John Widdowson  
Principal  
New College, Durham  
Framwellgate Moor Campus  
Framwellgate  
Durham  
DH1 5ES

Dear Mr Widdowson

Ofsted Survey Programme 2006/07

Aspect: The contribution made by CoVEs to the development of vocational work, including preparation for the specialised 14-19 diplomas, in schools.

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation during my visit on 08 December 2006. I am particularly grateful to Mark Anderson for his hard work in preparing the programme and background documentation and giving up his time during the visit. Please pass on my thanks to other staff who gave up their time to talk to me.

The visit provided much useful evidence for the good practice survey into CoVEs' work with schools. Where published reports cite specific aspects of good practice it is usual practice to name the colleges involved. However, where reports identify common issues which represent barriers to progress, individual colleges will not be named.

I agreed to provide a summary of my observations of good practice seen and to suggest some areas for development.

Good practice observed

- positive impact on learners' achievements and standards

Feedback from schools indicates that students following programmes with the college are often exceeding expectations and achieving better results than those predicted for them. Behaviour is also modified, and students generally appreciate the comparative freedom of the college environment. Increased maturity and a sense of responsibility are indicated by feedback from students and teachers. This impacts positively on other aspects of school life and the curriculum.

CoVE teachers are aware of how their provision relates to learners' other studies in schools, and students are performing better across different curriculum areas. There has been no formal mapping of the vocational skills developed to the wider school curriculum, but informal links are in place.

- successful initiatives to prepare college staff for interaction with younger age group

College staff have done a professional training programme to enable them to develop their teaching methodology specifically in relation to the younger people they now deal with. This has been useful in addressing aspects of teaching and learning, and is having a positive impact on both delivery and attitudes.

Current students have been involved in the development work through their links with the college. Modifications and improvements have been implemented as a result of feedback and observation. In one case, an IMI (Institute of motor industry) L1 qualification was replaced by a C&G entry level qualification. The group was split to meet different needs, so some students continued with original qualification.

- good use of jointly developed resources

The college has collaborated with schools to develop a suite of teaching and learning resources to support the new diplomas and the existing vocational curriculum. For example, workbooks and handouts have been developed, and awarding bodies have been involved in a consultative and advisory role in this process. Resources in ILT have been developed collaboratively, and these have been shared with schools.

The CoVE provision links well to the curriculum followed by students in schools. The CoVE has been able to support schools to develop their vocational curriculum by holding informative meetings, attending joint training events, supplying resources and developing common codes of practice disseminated through handbooks.

- good practice is well shared

College staff have qualified to teach in schools, and school teachers come in to college to teach on some of their programmes. There are regular, productive meetings to ensure that good practice is shared. The close links have a positive impact on students' perception of the courses and on their success rates.

- good collaborative work to prepare for new diplomas in locality

The college works with a wide range of partners, for example, LSN, CiTB, the heads of construction body and Edexcel, to develop and prepare for the new diplomas in the local area. It already has good links with employers in the area through its apprenticeship programmes. The CoVE facilities are very good, giving hands-on experience to school students alongside college students. The college has long-standing relationships with many employers in the area, and there has been active collaboration to ensure that the equipment used in the college meets current industrial standards. In some cases, former students who now run their own businesses return to college to find employees for their work. The college works well with school staff to draw up appropriate programmes and resources to run them.

- good progression to relevant employment and further and higher education

The college tracks students' progress, and results show that a high proportion progress to further vocational or academic learning or go into relevant employment. There is a clear correlation between the student's chosen route and the vocational learning they have done in most cases. In some cases, students' aspirations have been raised through their participation in these programmes, and they have progressed to a different route with greater self-confidence.

- good management of partnership arrangements

There is good management of partnership arrangements. Many links with industry are of long standing, and there is good understanding of the needs and requirements of all partners. Communications between the CoVE and its partners are good. Meetings are regular and productive. Discussion is frank, and changes and improvements are introduced as necessary. There are good arrangements between schools, employers and the college to support students in their vocational pathways, and information on their progress is shared at all stages of the programme. There is good input from senior staff in the college, demonstrating the college's clear strategic focus on developing these links.

Areas for development, which we discussed, included:

- level of understanding of format and intentions for new diplomas

There is currently a lack of clarity about how the new diplomas will be assessed. It is not clear whether students will need to pass every part of the diploma, or what mechanisms are in place if a student needs to repeat a

specific part of the diploma. The college has concerns that school staff will not have, or be able to maintain easily, the level of vocational knowledge and experience necessary to implement the diplomas. Some employers have little or no knowledge of the specialised diplomas, and school staff do not always have a clear idea of what the diplomas involve. Employers do not fully understand why the new diplomas will be better than the existing National Diploma, and there is some confusion over the boundaries between apprenticeships and the specialised diplomas.

- obstacles to effectiveness and to collaboration

The college has good links with businesses, but in some cases, employers are reluctant to share specialist resources and technological information because of the competitive nature of their business. A big challenge for the college is in working with school teachers who do not have the appropriate levels of expertise in the vocational area. At present there are insufficient levels of professional development for school staff to be able to develop this expertise. Transport is also an issue in this largely rural area with poor public transport links. This is a particular problem for the college when young students need to be transported to their dispersed work placements on the introduction of the specialised diplomas. Single programme funding for vocational learning centres is being used to convert a school gym into a vocational learning centre. The effectiveness of this in engaging young learners when it remains in a school environment will be tested in the near future. Timetabling remains an issue, and schools have not been able to provide the flexibility to work collaboratively to overcome these problems.

- inadequate quality of information received by students in schools about the CoVE provision

Responsibility for the dissemination of information to school students lies principally with school staff. They are responsible for selecting students to participate in vocational projects. The college believes that most young people who are academically strong are being retained by schools without being given the choice of a vocational route, and that schools continue to channel students who are academically weaker towards vocational programmes. In many cases, it is felt that school teachers have insufficient knowledge of the vocational area to give good quality information to their students. The college has worked to overcome some of these problems by offering taster sessions to school students, by liaising with school staff, by being present at careers events and parents' evenings and by inviting parents to the college to see what their children are actually doing.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop the ways in which your CoVE(s) support 14-19 curriculum development in the area.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your LLSC and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Jill Szutenberg  
ALI