Impact of the CoVE Programme on the Attitude and Engagement of Employers and Key Stakeholders

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Impact of the CoVE Programme on the Attitude and Engagement of Employers and Key Stakeholders

Second year of Longitudinal Study

Final Report

Learning and Skills Council

A report by GHK

In association with

IPSOS Public Affairs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1 Introduction
In November 2004, the Learning and Skills Council commissioned GHK and IPSOS Public Affairs to undertake the second annual survey of employers using the services of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) together with a programme of qualitative interviews with key programme stakeholders. This is the second year of a research study that aims to track longitudinally the programme’s influence on employer and stakeholder attitudes towards, and engagement with, post-16 learning and the FE sector in particular. Qualitative discussions with stakeholders provided the opportunity to examine this ‘attitudinal impact’ in more detail, including its influence on stimulating collaboration between CoVEs and other post-16 providers, and in contributing to various aspects of the regional and sectoral skills development agenda.

2 Study Aims and Methodology
To enable comparative analysis of findings across survey years, the study aimed to replicate the approach implemented in 2004 in order to explore:

- Employer perceptions of the CoVE programme – including levels of awareness, experience of engagement, the benefits of satisfaction with delivery, and any resultant change in their attitudes to post-16 training;
- The views of other colleges and providers not directly involved in the programme, to examine their relationships with the CoVEs, involvement in their events and activities, and to identify benefits such as changes in practice resulting; and
- The perceptions of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and employer organisations in terms of involvement in CoVE planning, joint networks, and CoVEs contributions to addressing strategic regional and sectoral vocational skills priorities.

The study approach consisted of two stages:

- A quantitative survey of employers – a total of 704 employers were interviewed by telephone during January and February 2005. This sample was broadly representative of the spread of CoVEs by region, sector and CoVE implementation round. Following the completion of the quantitative survey, a series of 20 qualitative interviews were undertaken with responding employers, to probe their experiences in more depth.
- A qualitative study of programme stakeholders – this included interviews with representatives of all nine RDAs, national and regional representatives of five SSCs in sectors with a strong concentration of CoVEs, and 20 training providers not directly involved in the CoVE programme.

3 Employer Engagement and Attitudes
Of the 704 employers participating in the study, all had been in some form of contact with their CoVE in the previous 18 months, with 83% using training services, 33% attending one-off meetings and events, and 18% participating in employer fora and other CoVE groupings on a more regular basis.
Employers participating in the 2005 survey had similar characteristics to those that participated in the 2004 survey and were shown to be:

- Most commonly small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) - over half (54%) of the survey’s respondents stated that they employ less than 20 members of staff on their site; and

- More likely to have trained their staff over the previous 12 months than the national average, as well as being more likely to have formalised arrangements for identifying and responding to workforce training needs.

In line with 2004 survey findings, employers participating in the 2005 survey were more likely to use CoVEs to source provision.

Employers have continued to use CoVEs most commonly to access training towards nationally recognised qualifications such as NVQs, or courses leading to such qualifications, for example Apprenticeships. They are also making greater use of CoVEs to access training relating to occupational standards.

Employer use of provision by qualification level, suggests that CoVEs are continuing to follow engagement strategies that include offering provision at different levels to encourage initial and continued employer use. Three in five employers reported use of Level 3 provision, over half of the respondents described using CoVEs for Level 2 and one in five for both Level 1 and Level 4 training.

Findings on the mode of training delivery provide evidence that CoVEs are continuing to build flexibility and responsiveness to employers into their delivery models. There has been a shift in emphasis towards the use of training modules delivered part-time, during evenings, or at weekends and a noticeable decline in the use of full-time provision delivered at the CoVE site, making this the least common mode of CoVE training delivery.

The main factors influencing employers’ decisions to use CoVE provision included the ability to offer specifically tailored training, reputation for quality, reasonable price, availability of specialist staff, and high quality equipment and facilities. All these factors were rated as important or very important by over two-thirds of respondents. These findings represent limited change on 2004 survey findings, with the exception of the importance of the CoVE brand in decision making – now rated as important or very important by just under 70% of employers, compared to just over 50% in 2004. The ranking of the CoVE brand as an important or very important factor moved from seventh to fifth, and this factor appears to be becoming more influential amongst employers new to CoVEs (i.e. those using their CoVE for less than one year).

Employers described a series of benefits resulting from their engagement with the CoVEs, including providing employees with business-relevant skills, improving competences and the introduction of new working practices. Over half of the survey’s respondents considered that the use of CoVE services had increased the efficiency of their businesses, while almost two thirds agreed or strongly agreed that the training they had accessed had led to increases in staff confidence, motivation and morale. These findings compare favourably with those from the 2004 survey and suggest that overall, CoVEs are maintaining a beneficial offer to employers.
A series of indicators were used to gauge and verify **employer satisfaction** with CoVE services, including:

- Quality of training – rated by 83% of users as excellent or good;
- Recommendations to colleagues – with 89% stating they would definitely or probably recommend the CoVE to other business colleagues;
- Value for money – with CoVEs being considered to offer excellent or good value for money by 74% of users responding;
- Comparative satisfaction – with two fifths (40%) of employers describing being more satisfied with CoVE services than those of other providers;
- Responsiveness to employer needs – 89% of respondents indicating that tailored training was an important or very important factor influencing their decision to use CoVE services stated that their CoVEs ability to provide this was either excellent or good.

In terms of influencing employer attitudes, the survey found evidence that the CoVE programme is **continuing to improve provision** in the areas that matter most to employers. When asked to indicate the areas where they had seen improvements in training provision in the past 3 years, or since they had been using the CoVE:

- 50% of employers using training services considered there was now more training provision relevant to their needs – compared to 39% in the 2004 survey;
- 43% reported that the training accessed was more flexibly timed – compared to 29% in the previous survey;
- 37% drew attention to the presence of more specialist / expert teaching staff in CoVEs – compared to 26% in the previous survey.

The 2005 survey also provided evidence that suggests CoVEs are continuing to contribute to a change in **employer attitudes to FE more broadly**. While over half of the employers interviewed (54%, 336) reported not using other FE provision, this was significantly lower than the 2004 survey (by some six percentage points) and suggests that the CoVE programme may have contributed to changing employer behaviour.

Of the employers not using other FE provision **61% (181) had changed their attitudes to FE** as the result of using a CoVE. Some 28% (84) of non-FE users considered that they would definitely approach other colleges in future, with 33% (97) stating that they probably would. In addition, employers in this group were **increasingly likely to seek out other CoVEs** to meet their additional training needs. In comparison to the 2004 survey the proportion of employers who considered they would definitely or probably seek out other CoVEs rose by five and two percentage points respectively, while those less likely to seek out other CoVE provision fell by 13 percentage points. This suggests a **growth in confidence in the CoVE brand** and that CoVEs are a route in for employers who remain uncertain about the wider FE offer.

4 **Key Stakeholder Attitudes and Engagement**

**Sector Skills Councils (SSC) Perspective** – The SSC interviewees described a strengthening of engagement with the CoVE programme and individual CoVEs. The emphasis of engagement has moved towards working with established CoVEs by
involving them in the establishment of Sector Skills Agreements, and the review or development of National Occupational Standards. However, the level of engagement with individual CoVEs continues to vary, with **SSCs being more likely to form partnerships with CoVEs that proactively seek their involvement** and can demonstrate their alignment with SSC priorities and work programmes. SSCs were able to identify complementary areas between their own objectives and those of the CoVE programme. These have resulted in a range of benefits for SSCs, which most commonly included: opportunity to steer the direction of CoVE provision; increased dialogue with the FE sector; and the use of CoVEs as effective delivery partners for piloting SSC initiatives.

Despite what was considered to be a significant investment in CoVEs, the SSCs did not however, consider that the level of service enhancement they had expected to see had been achieved across the programme. The SSCs interviewed were able to point to notable exceptions to this, where individual and groups of CoVEs had demonstrated their demand-led credentials and made effective contributions to initiatives driving the current skills agenda. Overall, however, there was a perceived need for CoVEs to ‘raise their game’ - particularly in terms of delivering on the sector specific needs of employers and the quality of provision.

**Regional Development Agency Perspective** - In most cases, RDA engagement with the programme has continued to be through involvement in inter-agency CoVE working groups. Most RDAs agreed that the CoVE commissioning process had become more effective in the latter programme rounds, and has strengthened the degree of ‘strategic fit’ between CoVE distribution and regional strategic priorities. As with SSCs, a greater emphasis is now being placed on supporting existing CoVEs. In three regions, RDAs are continuing to support the enhancement of the CoVE programme through the provision of additional funding for CoVEs that have evidenced their ability to contribute to the regional skills agenda. Once again, RDAs were able to identify a range of benefits resulting from their engagement in the CoVE programme, which included: an opportunity to provide a regional steer to a national skills programme the continued strengthening of relationships with local LSCs, and investment in CoVEs that offers value for money. CoVEs, in ‘niche’ sectors, those addressing strategic regional priorities and those working with regionally important employers have demonstrated an ability to be strategic partners. However, for more CoVEs to play a strategic role there needs to be strong collaboration between CoVEs, the development of collective views across CoVE regional networks and increased advocacy of the network’s “added value” by the LSC - on both a local and regional basis. The potential exists for CoVEs to act as key vehicles for implementing collaborative solutions emerging from Sector Skills Agreements and priority areas identified in the forthcoming Regional Skills Partnership Action Plans. However, to do this, RDAs’ perceived that CoVEs need to reassert and publicise their employer-led credentials more widely, and provide evidence that they are engaging a broader base of employers.

**The Non-CoVE Provider Perspective** - Here diversity was the key characteristic of CoVE and non-CoVE provider relationships. Around two thirds of providers described a reasonable level of awareness of the CoVEs in their area and around half were able to comment on the nature of their engagement with CoVEs. This has ranged from attendance at regional CoVE network meetings and the exchange of information and ideas, to support from CoVEs in preparation of proposals and joint planning and delivery with CoVEs. Benefits described have generally derived from enhanced networking, expert advice from CoVEs, sharing information on systems development
and in some instances, the perceived ‘kudos’ from association with the CoVE brand. The extent to which the CoVE programme was viewed as providing an opportunity to develop strategic partnerships was mixed. However, the majority of non-CoVE providers recognised the significance of this aspect of CoVEs remit and considered the ability of CoVEs to adopt a wider perspective and a longer–term strategic approach of particular importance. The recognition afforded by the award of CoVE status, and the accompanying resource, was perceived to further underline the responsibilities of CoVEs to be particularly active in terms of promoting collaboration and supporting other providers to raise their standards.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

The strongest and most positive change appears to be in the views and experience of employers that directly engage with CoVEs. Based on both the 2004 and 2005 employer survey findings, it appears that amongst the employers interviewed:

- Direct use of CoVE training has changed attitudes towards engagement with the FE sector.
- Attitudes to training amongst employers engaging with CoVEs, but yet to use their training services, has improved.
- CoVE use may be encouraging the sourcing of training requirements from elsewhere in the FE sector.

Furthermore, analysis of trends between survey years provides evidence of employers’ changing attitudes and perceptions of the CoVE offer, in terms of:

- The growing credibility of the CoVE brand amongst employers and its association with high quality training provision.

- The characteristics that differentiate CoVEs as training providers – with CoVEs’ abilities to offer flexibly timed, tailored training delivered by more specialist teaching staff being three of the four important or most important factors influencing training decisions.

- The extent to which CoVEs are recognised as delivering demand-led and responsive training – with employers rating CoVEs’ abilities to offer tailored training and to respond to their needs highly.

- The role of CoVEs in offering a route into public sector-delivered training for employers remaining uncertain about wider FE provision.

Conclusions regarding stakeholder engagement and changing attitudes are less positive, however. While regional and sectoral representatives described a move towards working with established rather than developing CoVEs, few significant changes in attitude were identified in the 2005 study. A view emerged that the network had made limited progress in articulating or demonstrating its ability to deliver a strategic approach to enhancing the quality of vocational provision. The stakeholders considered that:

- The programme has not changed views on training and the use of FE provision in the wider employer population – a perception supported to some degree by the survey finding that CoVE users remain atypical of the wider employer population in terms of their propensity to provide training for their staff.
- The role played by the FE sector has not changed – with little evidence being presented to suggest that CoVE status has enabled providers to play an enhanced role in the delivery of demand-led provision. With notable exceptions, stakeholders perceive that CoVEs have not capitalised on sectoral or regional opportunities to contribute to shaping or delivering demand-led provision, or proactively linked with other sectoral or regional initiatives.

- The CoVE network has not significantly contributed to strengthening the FE offer – with awareness of collaborative activity between CoVEs and other providers remaining limited and suggesting that CoVEs could do more to disseminate good practice or encourage other providers to adopt innovative or improved practices.

A series of success factors for the programme were also identified as part of the study and in many areas replicate, and so reinforce, the factors identified in 2004, namely:

- Continuing and developing responsiveness to employer needs - by delivering on the factors that most strongly effect employers’ decision to work with a CoVE.

- Promotion of the CoVE programme - in terms of the range of services that CoVEs can offer employers, and by more widely disseminating CoVE achievements to key partners and stakeholders.

- Maintaining a strong focus on delivering quality – the employer survey suggests that employers are increasing associating CoVEs (and the CoVE brand) with quality. If more employers are to be encouraged to train their workforce, it is essential that individual CoVEs continue to deliver on this expectation and that consistent levels of quality are available across the network.

- Strengthening perceptions of CoVEs as demand-led training providers - changing stakeholder perceptions and experiences on this issue will depend on the entire CoVE network being focused on the delivery of this objective.

- Maintaining employers’ engagement in the design of provision – positive work to date needs to continue and extend across the network to influence the practices of other training providers.

- Capturing and exploiting strategic partners’ willingness to engage - CoVEs need to make more of the channels available to them to play a strategic role in initiatives and programmes that aim to strengthen regional/sectoral training offers more widely.

- Evidencing CoVE achievement against national and regional skills priorities and agendas - to enhance the network’s credibility amongst strategic stakeholders as well as raising the profile of the CoVE network more widely.
1 INTRODUCTION

In November 2004, GHK and IPSOS Public Affairs were commissioned by the Learning and Skills Council to undertake the second national survey of employers engaging with Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs), and a programme of qualitative interviews with key programme stakeholders. This is the second year of a research study that aims to track, longitudinally, the programme’s impact on the attitudes and engagement of employers and key programme stakeholders, and to assess achievement against the 'enhancing collaboration' and 'changing attitudes' CoVE programme outcomes.

The report outlines the key findings from the study, together with recommendations for the programme overall. As an introduction, however, the report begins with an overview of the CoVE programme, a description of the aims of the study and the methodology followed, and a summary of the key findings of last year’s research.

1.1 Overview of the CoVE Programme

The programme, which commenced in July 2001, forms part of the Government’s strategy to modernise the role that colleges and work based learning providers play in the national economy. It aims to create a network of sectoral Centres of Vocational Excellence to develop new, and enhance existing, high quality provision focusing on the Level 3 vocational skills needs of employers.

The programme aims, by April 2006, to have established over 400 Further Education (FE) college and private sector training provider CoVEs which create a strategic network of high quality centres that takes account of local, regional, national and sectoral needs. In addition, the programme also seeks to:

- Increase and strengthen active employer engagement, to develop and build on existing innovative and flexible approaches to current and future skills needs.
- Secure enhanced vocational learning opportunities for all learners in the FE sector and 14-19 year olds in school, with a focus on developing employability skills and career prospects, particularly for those from disadvantaged groups.
- Encourage collaboration amongst providers and promote the concept of excellence in economically important vocational specialisms.

A phased approach has been adopted to the creation of the network, with an initial pathfinder round and nine subsequent implementation rounds. At the time this study was conducted, 223 FE college and private training sector CoVEs had been awarded Full CoVE Status\(^1\).

1.2 Study Aim

The aim of the study was to replicate, in so far as is possible, the approach devised to assess the impact of the CoVE programme by exploring:

\(^1\) CoVEs enter the programme with Interim Status and during the first development year work towards fully meeting the CoVE criteria in order to be assessed for Full CoVE Status.
Employer perceptions of the programme – including levels of awareness, previous/potential future use of CoVEs and benefits of/satisfaction with training delivery.

The views of other, non-CoVE colleges and providers - to examine their relationships with CoVEs, involvement in their events and activities, and resulting benefits such as changes in practice.

The perceptions of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) - in terms of involvement in CoVE planning, provision of labour market and other information, joint networking, and contributing to the achievement of RDA and SSC strategic priorities.

Using the findings from the 2004 study as a ‘baseline’, this year’s research also aimed to explore the degree of change in experiences and perceptions of the CoVE programme and attitudes towards FE training provision more broadly. Box 1.1 summarises the key findings of last year’s study to set the context for this year’s work.

**Box 1.1: Employer Engagement and Attitudes – 2004 Study Findings**

- Some 520 employers took part in the study, of whom 84% had used CoVE training services, 20% attended one-off meetings/events, and 13% took part in employer fora/groups.
- Most employers accessed training at Level 3, although over half used Level 2 and one in five used Level 1 and Level 4 provision, suggesting CoVEs followed employer engagement strategies that included offering a range of provision.
- The main decision making factors for CoVE use included: the offer of tailored training, reputation for quality, reasonable price, availability of specialist staff, and high quality equipment/facilities. However few employers described the CoVE ‘brand’ as important in their decision making, suggesting reputation was more influential than CoVE status.
- Benefits of CoVE training included: providing employees with business-relevant skills, improving competences and introducing new working practices. Almost half (47%) felt that CoVE services had increased the efficiency of their business.
- Employers were highly satisfied with CoVE training services in terms of: quality (82% rated excellent or good), repeat use (72% used their CoVE regularly), value for money (rated excellent or good by 75%) and comparative satisfaction (almost 40% were more satisfied with CoVE services than those of other providers).
- Employers valued CoVE fora and networking meetings for informing them about training services, and allowing them to feed into the development of new and revised provision.
- The CoVE programme has contributed towards influencing employer attitudes to training by improving provision in the areas that matter most to employers. Of those using CoVE training: 39% felt there were more relevant training opportunities at their CoVE, 36% described the training on offer as being of a higher quality than previously available, and 29% felt access to training had improved, e.g. through the more flexible delivery timing.
- CoVE use showed signs of influencing attitudes to FE provision. 60% of employers not previously using other FE provision stated they were likely to in future, and 71% of those engaging with CoVEs fora/networking meetings were likely to use CoVE training services.

**Key Stakeholder Attitudes and Engagement – 2004 Study Findings**

- RDA engagement with the CoVE programme was primarily through inter-agency CoVE working groups, involvement in regional planning and through offering advice and guidance to support the regional moderation process. Engagement has increased over time, through an appreciation of the role CoVEs can play in meeting regional/target sector skills needs.
The RDAs were, however, less certain about the benefits of the CoVE programme for non-CoVE providers, and felt enhancing collaboration was lower on individual CoVE agendas.

In terms of attitudinal change, CoVEs were seen as potential strategic partners, although there remained some way to go before the potential of this collaboration is fully realised.

SSC involvement took place mainly at the individual CoVE level, with examples of intensive collaborative work being identified as well as the more common seeking of SSC endorsement by CoVEs. Active SSC involvement focused on proposal development, although examples of SSCs working with CoVEs in their development periods were found.

SSCs were receptive to opportunities to work with CoVEs, and would welcome more referrals from local LSCs. The establishment of SSDA regional managers was a key opportunity for closer working, as CoVEs become recognised as strategic sectoral development partners.

Non-CoVE providers’ relationships were mainly developed once CoVE bids were successful, and included collaborative activities in years 2 and 3 of CoVE development.

The non-CoVE providers referred to a series of benefits from their joint work, including widening discussions on strategic issues, sharing information on curriculum planning and delivery, sharing delivery of learner targets and receiving expert advice from the CoVEs.

Impacts appeared limited in terms of influencing the attitudes of non-CoVE providers, as many CoVEs were already renowned for collaborative work prior to receiving CoVE status.

There was, however, agreement that CoVE status appeared to bring with it an enhancement of strategic capacity/outlook, and the programme was considered to be a potential vehicle for collaboration.

1.3 Methodology

The 2005 study followed the methodology developed for the first study, comprising: a quantitative survey of employers engaging with CoVEs/using their services; a programme of qualitative interviews with key programme stakeholders; and more detailed interviews with a sample of non-CoVE providers and employers. Fieldwork took place between January and April 2005, with key tasks being shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1. Key Study Tasks

<table>
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<th>Stage</th>
<th>Key Tasks</th>
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<td>Employer Survey</td>
<td>704 employer interviews (against an initial target of 600), with employers engaging with CoVEs in the last 18 months.</td>
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</table>

| Qualitative Interview Programme – Employers | • Qualitative interviews with 20 employers using CoVE services, to discuss issues and key trends emerging from the quantitative survey. Of these 12 had used CoVE services, and eight had been involved in other CoVE activities, including sitting on steering groups, employer fora and one-off events. |
| Qualitative Interview Programme – Key Stakeholders | Interviews with the following stakeholders: |
| | • Representatives of all 9 RDAs |
| | • Representatives of 5 SSCs at both national and regional level (10 interviews in total) |
| | • 20 non-CoVE providers, including FE colleges and private training providers. |
As the primary objective of the study was to replicate and build upon the previous year's work and so allow the comparative analysis of findings, changes to the methodology were limited to areas posing challenges in the previous year's research. These included:

- Developing the employer sample – CoVEs were asked to provide details of all employers they worked with, although to ensure currency full interviews were only conducted where employers had used CoVE services in the previous 18 months (i.e. between July 2003 and December 2004). A total of 135 CoVEs provided contact details for 8,648 employers – a considerable improvement on the previous year. However, to ensure a balance across the sample criteria of sector, region and round, an additional 104 employer interviews were conducted over target, making a total of 704.
- Changes to the employer survey questionnaire – changes were minor to ensure comparability, but included additional questions on:
  - CoVEs’ ability to offer training to meet employers’ specific needs - asked only of employers considering responsiveness as important in their decision to use CoVE services, as a means of gauging CoVE responsiveness.
  - The benefits of CoVE training on staff confidence, motivation and morale.
- Survey work with non-CoVE users – discussions with employer members of four SSC committee / forum groups were used to identify and examine the barriers to engagement with CoVEs. Soliciting the view of ‘informed’ employers proved an effective way of gauging the relative position of the CoVE offer within the current supply of vocational provision.
- Assessing the involvement of SSCs – in addition to interviews with national staff, discussions with SSC regional representatives took place to provide a more in-depth understanding of CoVE engagement at the regional and local levels.

As with the previous study, many of the employers participating in the survey element may be considered to be atypical in terms of their training profile – notably as by definition they had engaged with a CoVE for training or other services. This characteristic presented an opportunity to question employers in greater depth than might otherwise have been possible, especially in relation to their satisfaction with CoVE provision in comparison with other training provision and their attitudes towards training with the FE sector in general.

1.4 Report Structure
The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- Section 2 - outlines the key findings from the employers survey on engagement and attitudes
- Section 3 - reviews the experience of key strategic partners to the CoVE programme, namely SSCs and RDAs then goes on to detail non-CoVE providers experience of collaborative working with CoVEs
- Section 4 – draws conclusions and recommendations for the programme.
2 ENGAGEMENT AND ATTITUDES OF EMPLOYERS

2.1 Introduction
This section presents the findings of the survey of employers engaging with CoVEs in the period between July 2003 and December 2004. It describes the characteristics and training profile of employers participating in the survey, and reviews their experience of CoVE services and the resulting benefits for their businesses. Employers’ experience of other forms of CoVE engagement are also discussed, and the section concludes by reviewing the impact of involvement with CoVEs in terms of attitudes towards training and the FE sector overall. Comparisons with the findings of the 2004 employer survey are made throughout this section, to explore changes in employers’ perceptions of CoVE services and their impact on employer attitudes.

2.2 Sample Characteristics of Employers Engaging with CoVEs
Interviews were achieved with a total of 704 employers engaging with CoVEs, the key characteristics of which are summarised in Box 2.1 below. The achieved interview sample met each of the quotas set for it, with the exception of ‘construction – building services’, ‘catering and hospitality’ and ‘minority specialism’ which minimally under achieved the target quota (by less than 10% in each case).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 2.1: Employer Sample Characteristics in Summary</th>
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<tr>
<td>▪ <strong>Size/numbers employed</strong> - the sample predominantly comprised of small and medium size employers, with 54% stating that they employ less than 20 members of staff on their site.</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ <strong>Regional distribution</strong> - an average of 78 employers were interviewed in each region, ranging from 95 employers in Yorkshire and the Humber to 49 in the North East.</td>
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<td>▪ <strong>Employer training profiles</strong> – the employers interviewed were atypical of the national picture, with 95% providing some form of employee training in the past year, and 72% having formal processes for identifying training needs and developing action plans.</td>
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<td>▪ <strong>CoVE engagement</strong> – the employers had most commonly used CoVEs for training services (83%), with one third (33%) having attended CoVE events and 18% being regularly involved in employer networking forums or steering groups.</td>
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<td>▪ <strong>Engagement by CoVE Round</strong> – was largely representative of the CoVE network by CoVE Round (including the distribution of FE and private sector providers CoVEs), and CoVE sector specialism.</td>
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</table>

Following methodological issues with the 2004 survey, the sector of CoVE specialism was used as a proxy for employers’ industrial sectors. The distribution of respondents by CoVE sector specialism is shown as Chart 2.1, and shows employers engaging with engineering CoVEs made up the largest sectoral group (23% of the sample), followed by construction crafts, business and management, and the creative industries (each accounting for approximately 10% of respondents). Fewer employers had engaged with CoVEs specialising in tourism (2%), land based activities such as agriculture and horticulture (4%), and health and care (5%). These differences reflect the sampling approach followed which aimed to reflect the distribution of CoVEs nationally.
Chart 2.1 Employers by CoVE Sector Specialism

Compared to the 2004 survey, employers using business and management CoVEs accounted for a greater share of respondents (plus 9.4 percentage points), and those using construction CoVEs a lower share (-7.6 pp). In all other sectors, change as a proportion of the total sample size was within a range of +/- 5 percentage points.

Data on respondents by size, in terms of numbers employed, suggests that CoVEs are continuing to work mainly with small and medium size employers. As Chart 2.2 shows, employers with less than 20 staff made up over half the sample (54%), with most having 10 employees or less (39%). Further analysis shows the proportion of employers with under 20 employees grew by 6 percentage points – to some extent accounted for by a concentration of smaller employers in the London and East Midlands regions, where over half had 10 employees or less.

Chart 2.2 Employers by Employee Size Band, 2004 and 2005
As Chart 2.3 shows distribution of **employers by region** was largely even. On average 78 employers from each of the nine English regions took part in the survey. The largest number of employers (95) came from Yorkshire and the Humber, and the smallest from the North East (49), again reflecting the studying sampling approach which aimed to reflect the national distribution of CoVEs.

**Chart 2.3 Distribution of Respondents by Region**

As one of the selection criteria for participation in the survey was involvement with a CoVE in the preceding 18 months, it was assumed that the **training profile** of the employer sample would be atypical of the national picture.

The 2004 survey showed that 96% of employers reported providing training to their employees in the previous 12 months, exceeding the National Employers Skills Survey ‘baseline’ figure of 64%\(^2\). Once again, findings from the 2005 employer survey indicated that almost all employers (95%) had provided some form of training to their employees over the past 12 months.

The proportion of employers that reported having a formal process in place for identifying training needs and developing action plans stood at 72%, two percentage points lower than findings from the 2004 employer survey. Again, this exceeded the national picture, where just 44% of 2004 NESS respondents described having similarly formalised planning arrangements.

In terms of the **content of training**, employers most commonly described (72%) accessing training towards formal qualifications or courses leading to such qualifications, such as Apprenticeships. Just under 60% of employers had accessed health and safety training. Comparison of the 2004 and 2005 survey findings showed an increased uptake of training for staff to achieve occupational or industry specific standards - 53% of employers, an increase of almost 9 percentage points on the 2004 findings.

In line with the 2004 employer survey findings, employers have continued to **source and deliver** a greater proportion of their training ‘in house’ (57%) than through external training organisations (52%). Small employers remained the most likely to train in-house, as did employers using CoVEs specialising in land-based industries and tourism. However, further analysis showed an increase in the average proportion of

\(^2\) National Employers Skills Survey 2004 Produced by the LSC in partnership with the DfES and SSDA.
training sourced externally (4%) with employers using health and care, ICT and minority specialism CoVEs seeming to be shifting their preferences from internal to external sources.

Table 2.1 summarises the 2004 and 2005 survey findings on the source of training by provider type and suggests a change in the sourcing of provision. As would be expected from the nature of the employer sample, CoVEs remain the training provider most regularly used by employers (52%). However, comparison of 2004 and 2005 survey data shows a shift in the share of employers reporting using CoVE provision, with the proportion of regular CoVE users falling by 20 percentage points. Analysis of this trend showed no discernable pattern across sectors, and applied regardless of how long an employer had been using their CoVE.

The findings also indicate an increased use of commercial training providers amongst the 2005 sample, with 74% reporting that they regularly or sometimes access training from this source, an increase of 16 percentage points on 2004 findings. Use of not for profit/voluntary sector providers remained relatively unchanged, however the findings did suggest a positive although relatively small change in the use of FE provision. Although the regular use of FE appeared to minimally decline across survey years, the 2005 survey indicated a 10 percentage point increase in those employers sometimes using FE provision and a six percentage point fall in those that reported no use. While these findings are positive, over half of the employer sample (54%) still reported not using FE colleges to meet their training needs.

**Table 2.1 Frequency of Use of External Training Provision, 2004 and 2005 (including the percentage point change between years)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Named CoVE</th>
<th>FE College</th>
<th>Commercial training providers</th>
<th>Not for profit/voluntary sectors providers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use regularly</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>-20pp</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use sometimes</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>+15pp</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not use</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>+5pp</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 2.3 Employers Using CoVE Training Provision

Employers using CoVE training services within the previous 18 months were by far the largest group in the survey, accounting for 83% (583) of the sample’s respondents. Of these 51% reported using CoVE services for over three years, 14% for between two and three years, and 34% for two years or less – broadly in line with the 2004 findings.

#### 2.3.1 The Nature of Training Used

As Chart 2.4 shows, employers have continued to most commonly use CoVEs to access training towards nationally recognised qualifications such as NVQs, or courses leading to such qualifications, for example Apprenticeships (77% of employers).
Comparison of 2004 and 2005 survey findings suggests that employers are making greater use of CoVEs to access training relating to occupational standards. As with the 2004 survey findings, around one third of employers have accessed customised training, while 46% have used training relating to specific occupational skills rather than leading to a qualification.

In terms of provision by qualification level, the 2005 survey findings closely mirror those of 2004, with the majority of employers accessing Level 3 qualifications (62%). Both entry (Level 1) and higher level (Level 4) qualifications had also been accessed by around one fifth of employers (21% and 22% respectively). Over half of employers (54%) reported accessing Level 2 qualifications via CoVEs, positively suggesting that CoVEs are continuing to follow engagement strategies that include offering provision at different levels to encourage initial and continued employer use.

Findings on the mode of training delivery provide evidence that CoVEs are continuing to build flexibility and employer responsiveness into their delivery models. As Chart 2.5 shows, there has been a shift in emphasis towards employers accessing training modules delivered part-time, during evenings or at weekends of 12 percentage points across most sectors, and a noticeable decline (-6 pp) in the use of full-time provision delivered at the CoVE site (and making this the least common mode of CoVE training delivery). The popularity of e-learning or distance learning packages does not appear to have increased, with only 4% of employers in the 2005 survey reporting that these methods are their main mode of delivery. Employers’ use of short courses (15%) and training delivered through a mixture of the methods (17%) remained broadly in line with the 2004 findings.
Chart 2.5 Mode of Training Delivery Used by Employers

2.3.2 Factors Influencing Employers’ Decisions to Use CoVE Training

As with the 2004 employer survey, employers described hearing about the CoVEs they had used from a variety of sources, as shown below in Table 2.2. The proportion of employers learning about CoVEs via marketing literature has increased by six percentage points, making it the most commonly reported source in 2005 and overtaking word of mouth/recommendations from other employers. This might also suggest that CoVEs are more pro-actively publicising their services.

Table 2.2 How Employers Learnt of their CoVE’s Training Offer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Information</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Through/by responding to marketing literature</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>+6pp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By word of mouth from other employers</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>-3pp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After working with the training provider previously</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>+4pp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Via employer forums</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>+1pp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following a direct approach by CoVE staff</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>-4pp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Via CoVE networking events/employer breakfasts</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0pp</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Employers were also questioned on the factors influencing their decision to use CoVE services, against a series of pre-coded options. The 2005 survey found that:

- Over 75% of employers rated CoVEs’ abilities to offer tailored training to meet their specific needs, and delivered to flexible timetables, as important or very important factors.
- Reputations for delivering high quality services, reasonable pricing, and the availability of specialist staff and industry standard facilities were viewed as important or very important by around two-thirds of employers (68%, 71% and 65% respectively).

- Fewer employers viewed the opportunity for training to take place at their premises, or to access training in new ways, as important or very important (56% and 40% respectively). Over a quarter (26% and 29% respectively) felt these factors were of little importance in their decision making process.

Chart 2.6 below compares the findings from the 2004 and 2005 surveys regarding factors influencing CoVE use. The chart shows limited change overall, with the exception of the importance of the CoVE brand in decision making – now rated as important or very important by just under 70% of employers, compared to just over 50% in 2004.

A slightly increased proportion (76% to 78%) of employers were aware that their provider was a Centre of Vocational Excellence in the 2005 survey, and rated this as an important or very important factor in their decision to use their CoVE. The ranking of the CoVE brand as an important or very important factor moved from seventh to fifth, and the CoVE brand appeared to be becoming more influential amongst employers new to CoVEs (i.e. using for less than one year). However, as Table 2.3 shows, the importance of the CoVE brand emerged as a more influential factor across employers using CoVEs over longer time periods.

**Table 2.3 Importance of the CoVE Brand (Percentage point changes 2004 - 2005)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of time using CoVE training provision:</th>
<th>Importance of the CoVE brand:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not at all/not important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>-11.6pp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1+ to 2 years</td>
<td>-17.5pp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2+ to 3 years</td>
<td>-0.3pp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 3 years</td>
<td>-14.2pp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>-11.6pp</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The influence and importance of the brand in decisions to use CoVE services was explored in the qualitative follow-up interviews with employers, with the findings being summarised in Box 2.2 below.

**Box 2.2: Importance of the CoVE Brand**

All 20 of the employers using CoVE services who were interviewed in depth considered that the CoVE brand represented quality, although not necessarily suggesting that standards were significantly different to provision available elsewhere. While several of the 20 reported quality as the main reason for their use of CoVE services, location emerged as the most common main reason for engagement.

In many cases the CoVE brand represented an **assurance of quality and provided a ‘comfort factor’** – in terms of guaranteeing high quality provision, facilities and support. One described how the brand offered “piece of mind that provision will meet industry standards”, others referred to an assurance of both quality and value for money.

The extent to which the CoVE brand would influence future CoVE use varied between the employers. Those with previous experience of the provider (both pre and post-CoVE status) considered that the brand had a neutral effect, as their direct knowledge of the provider would influence any continued use. However, two employers who used CoVEs alongside other provision reported being more likely to use CoVE services more.

The employers considered that the **influence of the CoVE brand would be greatest on employers not using CoVEs and/or new to training**. The employer who reported undertaking training for the first time described how their CoVE had provided important support in helping them to identify their training needs and had worked with them to arrange a package of training to meet their needs. This support, alongside the employer’s experience of receiving quality training and the resultant benefits, had made them particularly likely to use CoVE services in future. Their experience suggests that CoVEs can benefit from undertaking outreach work with ‘harder to reach’ employers (i.e. those new to training), which may offer opportunities for the development of long-term relationships.

All 20 of the respondents considered that their CoVEs were delivering quality provision – and so supporting the characteristics and strength of the brand. However, many also recognised the **importance of achieving and maintaining quality standards** across the wider CoVE network.

### 2.3.3 Benefits of Training

As in the 2004 survey, employers were asked to describe the **business benefits resulting from their use of CoVE services** against a series of pre-coded responses. This showed that of the employers responding to the 2005 survey:

- 79% agreed or strongly agreed that employees undertaking training had gained skills and experience that was valuable to their business.
- 64% agreed or strongly agreed that their training had provided staff with skills to work competently with industry standard machinery or equipment.
- 61% reported that their business is more able to comply with occupational standards.
- 46% agreed or strongly agreed that new working practice and skills had been introduced as a result of their involvement with a CoVE.

Employers were asked an additional question in the 2005 survey, which sought to identify the impact of CoVE provision on staff motivation. Almost two thirds of
respondents (62%) agreed or strongly agreed that the training they had received had led to increases in staff confidence, motivation and morale.

As with the 2004 survey, employers were less able to attribute direct ‘bottom-line’ performance benefits to their involvement with their CoVEs, although:

- 51% described seeing an increase in the efficiency of their business.
- 30% considered that the training will help or had already resulted in new business.

Table 2.7 compares the findings reported in the 2004 and 2005 surveys, and while differences in the share of respondents agreeing/strongly agreeing with each statement are seen, overall CoVEs appear to be maintaining a beneficial offer to employers with the exception of one key area.

Appreciation of CoVE services appears to have decreased in terms of ensuring staff are ‘trained to work competently with industry standard machinery or equipment’. Further analysis of this finding showed that employers using CoVEs specialising in engineering and the construction industries viewed this aspect of their offer less positively, as did employers using CoVE services for less than 2 years.
Chart 2.7 - Benefits of Training

- The employee participating in the training gained skills and experience that is valuable to the business
  - 2004: [Chart Data]
  - 2005: [Chart Data]

- The business now has staff that are trained to work competently with industry standard machinery or equipment
  - 2004: [Chart Data]
  - 2005: [Chart Data]

- The business has been introduced to new working practices and skills
  - 2004: [Chart Data]
  - 2005: [Chart Data]

- The business is more able to comply with occupational standards/levels of competency necessary
  - 2004: [Chart Data]
  - 2005: [Chart Data]

- We have seen an increase in efficiency in the business due the training received from named CoVE
  - 2004: [Chart Data]
  - 2005: [Chart Data]

- The training received from named CoVE will (or has) helped us to achieve new business
  - 2004: [Chart Data]
  - 2005: [Chart Data]
2.3.4 Employer Satisfaction with CoVE Services

In addition to the benefits resulting from them, employers were questioned on their overall satisfaction with the CoVE services they had received. Given that questions on user satisfaction can tend to generate strong positive responses, a ‘composite’ approach, also used in the 2004 survey, was followed to build up a picture of overall satisfaction from a series of variables.

The question posed in the 2005 survey to ascertain employers’ overall satisfaction yielded positive results, with 83% reporting that the quality of the training they had received as excellent or good, consistent with the views reported in the 2004 survey (82%).

To probe employer satisfaction in more detail, a series of additional perceptions were considered. The 2005 survey showed that CoVEs have been able to maintain a relatively high satisfaction and approval rating in terms of:

- Delivering high quality provision - with 66% being prepared to recommend CoVE services to other employers and 23% stating they probably would.
- The price of training - a factor considered important or very important by 71% of employers, with 74% considering CoVE provision to be excellent or good value for money.
- Comparative satisfaction - two fifths of employers (40%) said they were more satisfied with the services received from CoVEs than from other training providers. Only 6% of respondents described being less satisfied, closely mirroring last years findings.
- Repeat usage – a strong relationship emerged between employers regularly using CoVEs and the likelihood of future CoVE use (74% of regular users reported that they will definitely use CoVEs again). However the fall in the regular use of CoVEs is reflected in employers’ intentions for future use, with a smaller proportion of employers stating they would definitely use their CoVE again (61%) compared to 66% in the 2004 survey. Further analysis showed no discernable trends to account for these changes, however less frequent use of CoVEs does not appear to be resulting from dissatisfaction (as only 4% of users reported not planning to use their CoVE again).

For the 2005 survey, an additional question was introduced to explore CoVEs responsiveness to employers’ needs. Those indicating that tailored training was an important or very important factor influencing their decision to use CoVE services were then asked about the CoVEs ability to offer training that met this need. A positive 89% (373) of respondents to this question stated that CoVEs’ ability to do this was either excellent or good.

The follow-up interviews with 20 employers included those describing where CoVEs had taken particular steps to be responsive to their needs. Box 2.3 summarises the findings of these follow-up interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 2.3: Responsive CoVE Provision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The importance of CoVEs’ abilities to provide tailored training offers to meet employer needs was emphasised across the employers, with examples of such responses including:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• **Arranging ‘additional’ provision** – either by introducing new provision or amending/enhancing existing courses. Examples of new provision included specialised training on medication for a care sector employer, additional training for LPG and gas fitters for a construction company, and the inclusion of inspection and testing elements within an electrical engineering course.

• **Following flexible delivery approaches** – in terms of venue, timing and mode of delivery. The employers commonly reported CoVEs seeking to identify and utilise the most appropriate venues for provision (be they on the employer or provider sites, and in one case including assessment visits at individual learners’ homes) and scheduling delivery around employer and learner needs (such as responding to shift patterns and commonly delivering outside 9 to 5 hours). A range of different delivery modes were also described, from 1:1 approaches and ‘classroom’ based delivery to distance learning and ICT-based approaches.

• **Providing wider support to enable individual participation** – with measures taken by CoVEs including the provision of transportation from the workplace to the provider’s site, and offering childcare facilities. One employer described how they had benefited from training on how to conduct interviews, which emerged as a need from their own attempts to analyse training needs.

• **Helping simplify the training process** – the employers welcomed and praised CoVE efforts to ensure that the training provided was wholly relevant and appropriate to their staff, and delivered in the most effective manner. Measures taken included the specification of content, delivery mode and delivery schedule, with the employer new to training praising the support they received in terms of aiding the identification of need and development of an appropriate training package.

Several employers also praised the efforts made by their CoVEs to provide additional services where their needs alone would not make their delivery viable. In one case, an employer described how the CoVE had canvassed similar employers to see if they would be interested in specific provision, and then were able to develop a specialist course when other employers responded positively. In a second case an employer was particularly pleased with their CoVE’s attitude to meeting their needs, and how they had reduced their standard costs to enable the firm to afford the specialist service they required.

Examples of responding to **individual learner needs** were also identified, including:

• **Using appropriate models of learner support** – including visits at workplace, home, at different times etc. In several cases the ability to allow learners to progress at their own pace was stressed, and considered to be important in the high levels of completion and achievement they reported.

• **Including individual assessments at the outset** – the development of such models was in several cases underpinned by assessment processes to inform the content and pace of delivery. In one case an employer praised the use of mentors to undertake assessments and provide support, both in terms of “getting it right from the start” but also providing support throughout the delivery process.

Several examples were reported where CoVEs had **actively sought feedback** on their performance from both employers and individual learners, giving an opportunity to comment and raise any issues resulting from their training. The employers both appreciated and valued these opportunities – even when they had only positive comments to make - and considered them an indication of provider interest and commitment to maintaining quality. Such experiences were not reported by all employers, and may be an approach which could be followed more widely across the CoVE network.
2.4 Other Forms of Employer Engagement with CoVEs

While the majority of employers participating in the survey had received training services from their CoVEs, others described engaging with them in different ways. Of these 50 described regular involvement in CoVE networking forums or steering groups, while 93 had attended one-off events such as employer breakfasts. In addition, eight of the 20 employers taking part in the follow-up interviews also described having an involvement in employer fora, a range of one-off events and in one case their CoVE steering group.

Of the employers answering the survey questions relating to their involvement in regular networking or steering groups, just over half (54%) became involved following a direct approach from the CoVE. A further 22% had responded to CoVE marketing literature and 14% had heard of these activities from another employer. As in the 2004 survey, the majority of respondents had been engaged in CoVE networking/steering activities for over 12 months (72% of employers in comparison with 74% in the 2004 survey).

When questioned on their reasons for involvement with their CoVEs, over half of these employers (54%) cited the opportunity to input into the design of training provision.

Just under a quarter of employers (24%) described wanting to learn more about what the CoVE could offer them, with the same proportion seeking to meet and network with other employers.

The frequency of employers’ involvement in these types of activities remained broadly the same as in the 2004 survey, with 32% of employers said that the forum they were involved in met every four to six months. For 40% of employers, their involvement was more regular, with 14% meeting every one to two months and 26% meeting every two to four months.

Employers continued to find their involvement in networking and steering group activities beneficial. 78% reported that network/steering activities proved useful for sharing information with other employers, and 76% had found their involvement useful in learning about new developments in training in general. Around three-fifths of employers stated that networking/steering activities had given them the opportunities to provide CoVEs with feedback on their training needs, with a similar proportion stating that this had translated into an opportunity to influence the design of training available. When asked if their views had been taken into account in either the content or delivery of training offered by their CoVE, 67% (20) of these employers considered that CoVEs had made changes that reflected their views - providing a clear endorsement of CoVE responsiveness to employer needs.

Employers describing their involvement in CoVE events such as employer breakfasts had, on average, attended four events in the proceeding 12 month period, in line with the 2004 survey findings. As with employer involvement in network/steering activities, direct approaches from CoVEs were cited as an important channel for initial contact (37%). However, employers had most commonly heard about CoVE events via marketing literature (42%).

As with employer participation in CoVE networking/steering activities, the primary motivation for attendance at events was the opportunity to exchange information with other employers (54%). In addition:
38% of employers wanted to learn about qualifications and occupational standards relevant to the needs of their workforce

33% were seeking to establish whether the CoVE could provide training of relevance to their business

28% wanted information on the cost of training, and any funding that might be available.

Employers were asked to rate how useful these events had been overall. Findings closely mirrored the 2004 survey, with the same proportion of employers (79%) describing the events as useful or very useful. Only 5% of employers reported that events had not been useful.

The employer follow-up interviews also allowed the benefits of involvement with CoVEs outside of the provision of training to be explored. The benefits reported are summarised in Box 2.4 below.

Box 2.4: Benefits of CoVE Non-Training Services
The eight employers described a similar range of benefits from their engagement to the wider survey population, including:

Providing networking opportunities – reported as the main benefit for five of the eight employers. Although not always resulting in direct business benefits, two employers reported significant contracts had emerged from contacts established through CoVE networking events. A third employer described how they now undertake contract work for the CoVE as a result of attending a networking event. One technology based company described being initially reluctant to exchange ideas, but opened up once they got to know each other.

Providing the opportunity to provide feedback on training received – in terms of satisfaction, the achievement of expectations and if any further services would be beneficial.

Influencing future provision – although the employers were not always able to identify changes resulting directly from their inputs, three welcomed the opportunity to contribute to curriculum planning. In one case, a CoVE was reposted to have re-focused their catering provision away from ‘nouvelle cuisine’ and ‘back to basics’, as a response to comments from the employer and others using their provision.

The CoVEs themselves were also considered to have benefited from their employer relationships, most commonly expressed by the provision of work placements as well as the influences suggested above. However some employers considered that they had the opportunity to influence future provision more by direct contact as consumers rather than through networking or forum groups.

Finally, one employer spoke for many in describing an initial reluctance to participate openly in forum or discussion groups with their colleagues (and competitors). However, the employer described being impressed by the way in which the CoVE had facilitated and managed the process, which had resulted in a new openness, the sharing of ideas and experiences, and even resulted in examples of wholly new inter-company trading.

2.5 Employer Perspectives of Benefits and Changing Attitudes to Training

A key objective of the study was to establish the extent to which investment in CoVEs is having a noticeable impact on the content and delivery of training, its responsiveness to employer needs and whether, overall, this has led to a change in employers’ attitudes towards FE provision and training more generally. The study
findings are supportive of the CoVE programme’s contribution in all three areas, and show improvement across the majority of variables in comparison to the 2004 findings.

The CoVE programme is continuing to improve provision in the areas that matter most to employers. When asked to indicate the areas where they had seen improvements in training provision in the past three years, or since they had been using the CoVE:

- 50% of employers using training services (289) considered there was now more training provision relevant to their needs – compared to 39% in the 2004 survey
- 43% (248) reported that the training accessed was more flexibly timed – compared to 29% in the previous survey
- 37% (214) drew attention to the presence of more specialist / expert teaching staff in CoVEs – compared to 26% in the previous survey.

These benefits, which employers broadly attributed to the CoVE programme, were in line with the factors reported as most influential in their decision to access CoVE training. CoVEs’ abilities to offer training tailored to employers’ specific needs, timed to suit both businesses and employees and featuring more specialist teaching staff were three of the four important or most important factors influencing training decisions. Moreover, trends in the 2004 and 2005 survey data indicate that a greater proportion of employers are noticing CoVEs improvements in these areas – an increase of over 10 percentage points in each case.

Trends between survey years also indicate that employers have observed that CoVEs are continuing to make improvements in other areas:

- 39% (229) reported receiving higher quality training than other sources – compared to 36% in the 2004 survey
- 36% (210) described improved training accommodation or buildings – compared to 28% in 2004
- 32% of employers (188) reported the use of new IT/multimedia equipment and more innovative forms of training delivery – compared to 24% in 2004
- 30% reported the use of new industry standard machinery and tools – compared to 25% in the previous survey.

The 2005 survey also provided evidence that suggests CoVEs are continuing to contribute to a change in employer attitudes to FE more broadly. While over half of the employers interviewed (54%, 336) reported not using other FE provision, this was significantly lower than the 2004 survey (by some six percentage points) and suggests that the CoVE programme may have contributed to changing employer behaviour.

Further investigation identified that of the employers not using other FE provision 61% (181) had changed their attitudes to FE as the result of using a CoVE. Some 28% (84) of non- FE users considered that they would definitely approach other colleges in future, with 33% (97) stating that they probably would. In addition, employers in this group were increasingly likely to seek out other CoVEs to meet their additional training needs. In comparison to the 2004 survey the proportion of employers who considered they would definitely or probably seek out other CoVEs rose by five and two percentage points respectively, while those less likely to seek out other CoVE provision fell by 13 percentage points. This suggests a growth in confidence in the
CoVE brand and that CoVEs are a route in for employers who remain uncertain about the wider FE offer.

The 2004 survey highlighted a link between satisfaction with CoVE services and a change in attitude towards the FE sector. This link remains strong in the 2005 survey, with 59% (139) of employers reporting being more satisfied with CoVE services than other provision stating that they would definitely or probably approach FE providers in the future, compared to 60% (104) in 2004.

Employers who had not used CoVE training were asked about their attitudes towards future involvement. The majority of these employers described positive changes in their attitude towards training, as was also evidenced in the 2004 survey. A new question in the 2005 survey found that 76% (92) stated that their experience had encouraged them to consider using the CoVE for training in the future.

Trends between survey years indicate a slight increase in positive attitudes towards training overall:

- 75% (91) said that their involvement had made them more likely to undertake more training in the future – compared with 71% (58) in the 2004 survey
- 65% (79) described receiving information on training opportunities they previously did not know existed – compared with 63% (52) in the 2004 survey
- 61% (74) stated that training is now a more realistic option for their businesses – compared with 59% (48) in the previous survey

The same proportion of employers (67%) in each survey described how their engagement with a CoVE had helped them identify the potential value that training can add to their businesses (81 and 55 responses from the 2005 and 2004 surveys respectively).
3 ENGAGEMENT AND ATTITUDES OF KEY STAKEHOLDERS

3.1 Introduction
This section of the report describes the findings of the qualitative interviews undertaken with key stakeholders in the CoVE programme. It begins by exploring the experience of five Sector Skills Councils, before reviewing CoVE activity at the regional level through interviews with all nine RDAs. Finally, the views of non-CoVE FE and private training providers are reviewed, to examine links with and benefits resulting from the CoVE programme for them.

3.2 The Sector Skills Council Perspective
A total of 10 interviews were undertaken at the national and regional levels with representatives of five Sector Skills Councils (SSCs). The five SSCs were selected on the basis of representing sectors where CoVEs have a particularly strong presence, and the findings of the interviews are set out below.

3.2.1 Nature of Engagement with the CoVE Programme
The SSC interviewees described a strengthening of engagement with the CoVE programme and individual CoVEs at the national and regional levels. While this continued to include providing support to prospective CoVEs, the emphasis of engagement was felt to be moving towards working with established CoVEs. The nature of engagement had diversified over the past 12 months, and included:

- **Involvement in regional CoVE groupings and Specialist Development Groups** – through which SSCs have disseminated information on SSC activity and sector wide policy issues.

- **Providing a regional steer to the CoVE programme** – four of the five SSCs described an involvement in the CoVE proposal process (for example assessing proposals prior to regional moderation), as well as a more general role in advising on CoVE commissioning to ensure effective sectoral and spatial distribution.

- **Involving CoVEs in the establishment of Sector Skills Agreements (SSA)** – with CoVEs being part of SSC-led working groups to identify key issues relating to the demand for and supply of skills, and featuring as partners in draft SSAs for two of the SSCs consulted. A third SSC, also in the process of developing an SSA, described CoVE engagement as less formalised and achieved via other sectoral fora.

- **Involving CoVEs in SSC-led reviews and development of National Occupational Standards (NOS)** – although the degree of CoVE involvement has been variable across sectors. In one instance a regional group of CoVEs were reported to have worked collectively on the development of NOS relating to specialist occupations.

- **Work with CoVEs on qualifications reform** – through CoVE involvement in SSC working groups, and support from SSCs for qualifications development at the individual CoVE level, although the level of this activity has varied across sectors.
CoVE involvement in **piloting SSC initiatives** - such as Apprenticeship frameworks and the higher Apprenticeship degree, although this type of activity is currently limited to one sector.

**Advice and guidance** to individual CoVEs – primarily taking place at the regional level, both informally and more formally through SSC Regional Managers involvement in CoVE Steering Groups.

SSCs had a strong awareness of the regional and national distribution of CoVEs in their sector, and described adopting a proactive approach towards contacting individual CoVEs once proposals are approved. This has been assisted by local LSCs playing a more facilitative role than was previously the case. However, the level of engagement with individual CoVEs continued to vary between regions and sectors, with SSCs being more likely to form partnerships with CoVEs that proactively seek their involvement and can demonstrate their alignment with SSC priorities and work programmes. SSCs acknowledged that in some circumstances their ability to respond to requests from CoVEs may be limited, particularly in regions with a large preponderance of CoVEs within the SSCs footprint. Clearly, collaborative working between SSCs and CoVEs is an area for further development, and the SSCs considered that there needs to be an expectation, if not an explicit requirement, for CoVEs to actively seek to engage with their SSC.

### 3.2.2 Benefits of Involvement

SSCs were able to identify areas of complementarily between their own objectives and those of the CoVE programme. These have resulted in a range of benefits for SSCs, which most commonly included:

- **Opportunity to steer the direction of CoVE provision** via involvement in steering groups.

- **Increased dialogue with the FE sector** – with CoVEs providing a more formalised route for provider consultation. CoVEs were described as sitting on strategic consultation groups of one SSC in order to give the ‘up to date providers’ view’.

- **Effective delivery partners for piloting SSC initiatives** – two SSCs considered that CoVEs were more suitable than FE providers for piloting due to their more formalised working relationships and greater buy-in from senior staff, which ensured momentum and commitment to joint-working was maintained.

CoVEs were also found to have benefited from SSCs’ enhanced engagement with the programme - most commonly by allowing access to the views of wider employer populations through their involvement in SSC working groups and strategic forums, and as a result of feedback from SSC representatives. Where SSCs are involved in CoVE steering groups, CoVEs are perceived to have benefited from assistance with, for example, development planning for years 2 and 3, advice on employer engagement strategies, signposting to other stakeholders and potential partners, as well as support for curriculum development. One SSC had seconded staff to CoVEs across a number of regions, to offer short-term assistance for course development and the implementation of Apprenticeship programmes.

However, doubt was expressed as to whether enhanced SSC involvement with CoVEs was delivering notable benefits to employers. While in most sectors employers accessing CoVE services have reported positive experiences, SSCs were unsure of the degree to which employers attribute this to a provider’s CoVE status.
While there was acknowledgement that a degree of collaborative activity between CoVEs and other providers is taking place, this was primarily perceived to be building on existing relationships in sectors that have traditionally shown an appetite for such work. Elsewhere in the network, the extent to which CoVEs are sharing good practice and innovation was reported as remaining variable.

3.2.3 Attitudes Towards the CoVE Programme and the FE Sector

Despite what was considered to be a significant investment in CoVEs, the SSCs did not consider that the level of service enhancement they had expected to see had been achieved across the CoVE network. This had raised doubts about the ability of individual CoVEs to respond strategically to the challenge of developing demand-led provision, and in some instances, the operational proficiency of CoVEs. The SSCs interviewed were able to point to notable exceptions to this, where individual and groups of CoVEs had demonstrated their demand-led credentials and made effective contributions to initiatives driving the current skills agenda. Overall, however, there was a perceived need for CoVEs to ‘raise their game’ – particularly in terms of delivering on the sector specific needs of employers and the quality of provision. The expansion of the network and its activity over the past 12 months does not appear to have positively changed perceptions of the wider FE sector, which is largely considered by SSCs interviewed to be operating in the same way as it did prior to the programme.

3.3 The Regional Development Agency Perspective

In each of the nine English RDAs, interviews took place with individuals with responsibilities for skills development or with specific knowledge of the CoVE programme in their areas. The findings from these interviews are described below.

3.3.1 Nature of Engagement with the CoVE Programme

In most cases, RDA engagement with the programme has continued to be through involvement in inter-agency CoVE working groups, albeit less frequently than was reported in the previous year’s study. Work to support the LSC regional moderation process has remained an important focus for these groups, alongside the task of reviewing CoVE progress and performance as the network has become more firmly established. Most RDAs agreed that the CoVE commissioning process had become more effective in the latter programme rounds, and has strengthened the degree of ‘strategic fit’ between CoVE distribution and regional strategic priorities. However, regional variations still existed, and a number of RDA representatives were able to point to regional priorities that they felt the CoVE programme was not effectively addressing, despite the majority of CoVE allocations having been agreed.

While RDAs have continued to work with prospective CoVEs by offering feedback on their proposals prior to submission, a greater emphasis is now being placed on supporting existing CoVEs. Although the nature and level of engagement varies across regions, RDAs most commonly described involvement in:

- **Facilitating CoVEs awareness of and involvement in other regional initiatives** such as the Adult Skills Pilots, regional skills brokerage models and Skills Alliance groups.

- **Representing the regional perspective** at CoVE Sector Development Group events and other regional CoVE forums.
• **Supporting specific CoVEs** whose interests closely aligned to regional priorities, or that work with important regional employers.

In three regions, RDAs are continuing to support the enhancement of the CoVE programme through the provision of additional funding for CoVEs that have evidenced their ability to contribute to the regional skills agenda. Examples of this include:

- In the North West, NWDA has provided significant investment for the North West Logistics CoVE.
- Yorkshire Forward has supported the Rail CoVE in Yorkshire and the Humber.
- East of England Development Agency (EEDA) has provided capital funding for four CoVEs aligned with their regional priorities.

In other regions there was a suggestion that the funding of CoVEs may also be taking place through sub-regional economic partnership structures, although RDA knowledge of this was limited.

### 3.3.2 Benefits of Involvement

Once again, RDAs were able to identify a range of benefits resulting from their engagement in the CoVE programme, which included:

- A continued opportunity for RDAs to provide a regional steer to a national programme.
- The continued strengthening of relationships with local LSCs – with several RDA representatives commenting on the opportunity for more open dialogue with LSC colleagues through their involvement with CoVE inter-agency working groups.
- Investments in CoVE enhancement that offers value for money – particularly in terms of widening employer engagement and strengthening the content of CoVE provision.

While RDA contact with individual employers using CoVE services remains limited, most respondents considered that CoVEs are offering an enhanced service that is broadly responsive to employer needs. While several RDA representatives considered that CoVEs offer employers an assurance of good quality, the views of the majority were tempered by the perception of variable quality provision across the CoVE network in their regions. However, there was broad acknowledgement that this perception was based for the most part on limited evidence.

As would be expected, more specific benefits were cited by the RDAs directly funding CoVE activities. These included the opportunity for employers to collectively voice their views to local LSCs through CoVE networking forums, and the provision of a vehicle for employer investment that has provided higher quality training in return.

Conversely, CoVEs were considered to have benefited from their engagement with RDAs mainly through access to advice during the preparation of bids and through any additional funding that RDAs have provided. While RDAs perceived that they had been pro-active in facilitating CoVE engagement in other regional initiatives, it was broadly agreed that CoVEs themselves could do more to capitalise on this and on RDAs' willingness to provide support where requested. Some RDAs also expressed surprise in the low number of requests they had received from CoVEs for direct support.
RDAs’ views remained uncertain about the benefits of the CoVE programme for non-CoVE providers in their region, although again most acknowledged that this was based on highly limited information. There was a sense that collaborative activity between CoVEs and other providers remains concentrated in sectors where such approaches were long-established - for example in the construction sector – and collaborative working remains lower on CoVEs’ agendas.

3.3.3 Attitudes Towards the CoVE Programme and the FE Sector

There was agreement amongst RDAs on the types of CoVEs that are likely to become strategic partners or had demonstrated the ability to do so. These included CoVEs in ‘niche’ sectors, those addressing strategic regional priorities and those working with regionally important employers. However, for more CoVEs to play a strategic role a series of conditions would need to be met, including:

- Stronger collaborative working between CoVEs – on a sectoral or spatial basis.
- The development of collective views and a common position across regional/sub-regional CoVE networks.
- Increased advocacy of the network’s added value by LSCs - on both a local and regional basis.

RDAs still largely regard CoVEs as independent (and individual) providers of training, with their activities to date doing little to influence RDA perceptions of FE more broadly. The RDAs were able to point to a range of opportunities to influence the current skills agenda that would be open to CoVEs demonstrating their strategic credentials. The potential exists for CoVEs to act as key vehicles for implementing collaborative solutions emerging from Sector Skills Agreements and priority areas identified in the forthcoming Regional Skills Partnership Action Plans. However, to do this, RDAs' perceived that CoVEs need to reassert and publicise their employer-led credentials more widely, and provide evidence that they are engaging a broader base of employers. RDAs also suggested that CoVEs will increasingly face competitive pressures as new sectoral and regional supply side initiatives are established. In summary, it was suggested that CoVEs need to qualify their achievements in terms of employer responsiveness and their ability to deliver in a business focused way if they are to be treated as strategic partners and influence the attitudes of RDAs.

Once again, the RDAs considered it unlikely that employers’ perceptions of FE provision will have changed substantially, with FE provision remaining widely perceived as being supply led. For example, the RDAs reported seeing little evidence of employers being prepared to pay the real cost of training with CoVEs, suggesting that CoVEs have further to go to demonstrate their demand-led credentials.

3.4 The Non-CoVE Provider Perspective

For this year’s study, the views of non-CoVE providers attending regional CoVE seminars were sought. As a consequence, there was a greater diversity in providers’ level of awareness and engagement with CoVEs than in the previous year’s study, where the views of non-CoVE providers were sought through CoVE and local LSC contacts.

3.4.1 Awareness of and the Nature of Engagement with the CoVE Programme

Over one third of the non-CoVE providers interviewed stated that they had little or no knowledge of the CoVEs in their area, although many commented that their
organisations were not particularly active in local provider networks or joint working across the sector. While this suggests that low levels of awareness may be symptomatic of a more general non-participatory approach on the part of the provider, it raises wider concerns given the degree of emphasis placed on collaborative working and sharing good practice across the sector.

The remaining two thirds of providers described a reasonable level of awareness of the CoVEs in their area. This principally related to those CoVEs with which they were collaborating, either on a department/faculty basis or as an institution as a whole. Knowledge was strongest amongst providers particularly active in formal and informal networking arrangements, local provider groups and LSC-driven activities, including the Strategic Area Reviews (STAR) and AWI processes.

Around half of the providers interviewed were able to comment on the nature of their engagement with CoVEs, which as illustrated in Box 3.1 remains diverse. Collaboration with CoVEs was most commonly undertaken on an informal basis, with the focus frequently being on strengthening their own provision, or on supporting CoVEs to develop their own offers.

**Box 3.1: Non-CoVE Providers’ Engagement with the CoVE Programme**

- **Attending Regional CoVE Network Meetings** - for non-CoVEs this was seen as an effective way to find out more about the CoVE network, both generally and locally.

- **Exchange of information and ideas** - examples of this type of involvement related to CoVEs in separate organisations as well as interaction with CoVE faculties/departments within the same College.

- **Support from CoVEs in bid preparation** - three providers in the process of finalising a bid for CoVE status had drawn on existing CoVEs as a source of information and guidance with regard to their application.

- **Joint planning and delivery with CoVEs** - one provider described how they were heavily involved with the planning and delivery of an IT CoVE, and had also supported the development of a Health and Social Care CoVE. However, interaction at this level between CoVEs and non-CoVEs remained uncommon overall.

Most providers expressed their intention to continue their interaction with individual CoVEs and, through regional and sectoral CoVE events, with the programme more generally. As would be expected, this intention was most prevalent amongst providers that had demonstrated a commitment to collaborative working. Providers less aware of the work of CoVEs and with lower levels of engagement anticipated that their future interaction with CoVEs would not increase, largely due to a lack of resources to support collaborative working, concerns over competition for local learners and the absence of local CoVEs in the provider’s sector.

### 3.4.2 Benefits of Engagement

Non-CoVE providers engaging with CoVEs were able to describe a range of positive outcomes resulting from their involvement, including:

- **Enhanced networking** through involvement in regional CoVE events – the most commonly cited benefit for non-CoVE providers, and one which had facilitated the establishment of a number of new relationships as well as strengthening existing ones.
- **Expert advice from CoVEs** to help non-CoVE providers develop their own provision – particularly in terms of non-traditional or innovative curriculum development.

- **Association with the CoVE brand** - collaboration with CoVEs had, for some non-CoVEs, generated a degree of kudos and increased credibility, especially amongst employers who tend to be more reactive to quality ‘kite marks’.

- **Sharing information on systems development** – CoVEs had assisted some non-CoVE providers in refining and improving their existing practices. In one instance a CoVE provided their entire suite of ALI inspection preparation materials to a non-CoVE provider, significant exceeding the provider’s expectations of the help that the CoVE would be willing or able to provide.

- **Sharing of resources and pooling of knowledge** in order the further develop areas of specialism – this was considered a key benefit for many providers. Some degree of cross-development was identified, where CoVEs in FE colleges considered to have supported non-CoVE departments by sharing information and enhancing the image of the institution for delivering high quality provision.

None of the providers reported strongly negative experiences in their dealings with CoVEs, although a number described a lack of momentum in moving their relationship with the CoVE forward after initial contact had been made.

As with the previous year’s study, non-CoVE providers found it difficult to comment on the benefits to employers deriving from their engagement with CoVEs. To their knowledge, employer awareness of the programme and the factors that might differentiate CoVEs from other providers had not changed in the past 12 months.

### 3.4.3 Attitudinal Change

As with last year’s study, the extent to which the CoVE programme was viewed as providing an opportunity to develop strategic partnerships was mixed. However, the majority of non-CoVE providers recognised the significance of this aspect of CoVEs remit and considered the ability of CoVEs to adopt a wider perspective and a longer-term strategic approach of particular importance. The recognition afforded by the award of CoVE status, and the accompanying resource, was perceived to further underline the responsibilities of CoVEs to be particularly active in terms of promoting collaboration and supporting other providers to raise their standards. However, the non-CoVE providers were keen to stress the importance of acknowledging that non-CoVE status does not necessarily imply a lack of quality provision.

Although defending market share was clearly a concern, more non-CoVE providers agreed that the programme had been a vehicle for collaboration. However some highlighted that CoVEs could potentially find themselves in a situation where they were competing for learners against the very providers they were expected to assist.

In terms of employer attitudes, there were mixed views on the value of the CoVE brand, with some providers perceiving this as a indicator of quality to which employers would respond, while others stressed that employers were themselves the best judge of quality, and would self-select in terms of who they approached. Furthermore, non-CoVE providers expressed uncertainly on whether CoVE activities were effective in addressing the perennial problem of disengagement from training within industry.
4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Introduction
This final section draws together the findings of the 2005 study and sets out our main conclusions on the extent to which CoVEs are impacting on the attitudes of employers and stakeholders, and the factors contributing to this. It then provides a summary of employers’ and stakeholders’ perspectives on the key issues that the CoVE programme will need to address if engagement and attitudes are to be influenced further. These issues, set out as a series of success factors, serve as recommendations for individual CoVEs and the LSC nationally, regionally and locally.

4.2 Impact of the CoVE Programme on Attitudes of Employers and Key Stakeholders
Within a 12 month period there are limitations on the extent to which attitudinal change can be expected to take place. However, the findings from the 2005 survey suggest such change has taken place, positively in the case of the employers responding to the survey and to less of a degree amongst the programme’s key stakeholders.

The strongest and most positive change appears to be in the views and experience of employers that directly engage with CoVEs. Based on both the 2004 and 2005 employer survey findings, it appears that amongst the employers interviewed:

- Direct use of CoVE training has changed attitudes towards engagement with the FE sector – for example in both survey years 60% of employers not using FE provision in the past said they would definitely or probably do so in the future.
- Attitudes to training amongst employers engaging with CoVEs, but yet to use their training services, has improved - in both survey years over 70% of employers considered their CoVE experience had increased their likelihood of undertaking more training in the future. Some 76% (92) of this cohort in the 2005 survey reported being encouraged to source their future training needs from CoVEs.
- CoVE use may be encouraging the sourcing of training requirements from elsewhere in the FE sector. The proportion of employers that reported not using FE provision fell by 6 percentage points between survey years, a small but significant change which suggests a change in employers’ attitude to the extent of effecting behaviour.

Furthermore, analysis of trends between survey years provides evidence of employers’ changing attitudes and perceptions of the CoVE offer, in terms of:

- The growing credibility of the CoVE brand amongst employers and its association with high quality training provision – with the CoVE brand becoming an increasingly important factor in employers’ decisions to use CoVE services, and reaching parity with ‘reputation for high quality service’ in the decision making hierarchy. This increasingly suggests that the CoVE brand has become synonymous with quality for many employers.
- The characteristics that differentiate CoVEs as training providers – with CoVEs’ abilities to offer flexibly timed, tailored training delivered by more specialist teaching staff being three of the four important or most important
factors influencing training decisions. These were also areas where employers’ reported noticing the greatest degree of improvement between survey years.

- The extent to which CoVEs are **recognised as delivering demand-led and responsive training** – with employers rating CoVEs’ abilities to offer tailored training and to respond to their needs highly. Where employers considered the ability to offer tailored training as an important or very important, 89% (373) considered their CoVE’s ability to do this was excellent or good. In addition, 67% (20) of employers involved in CoVE steering groups/employer forums reported they had the opportunity to influence the content or delivery of training, and considered that this had led to relevant changes being made.

- The role of CoVEs in **offering a route into public sector-delivered training for employers remaining uncertain about wider FE provision**. Employers not using FE training in the past reported being increasingly likely to seek out other CoVEs to meet their additional training needs. Employers considering they would definitely or probably seek out other CoVEs rose by five and two percentage points respectively between the 2004 and 2005 surveys, while those less likely to seek out other CoVE provision fell by 13 percentage points.

Conclusions regarding **stakeholder engagement and changing attitudes are less positive**, however. While regional and sectoral representatives described a move towards working with established rather than developing CoVEs, few significant changes in attitude were identified in the 2005 study. A view emerged that the network had made limited progress in articulating or demonstrating its ability to deliver a strategic approach to enhancing the quality of vocational provision. The stakeholders considered that:

- The programme has **not changed views on training and the use of FE provision in the wider employer population** – a perception supported to some degree by the survey finding that CoVE users remain atypical of the wider employer population in terms of their propensity to provide training for their staff.

- The **role played by the FE sector has not changed** – with little evidence being presented to suggest that CoVE status has enabled providers to play an enhanced role in the delivery of demand-led provision. With notable exceptions, stakeholders perceive that CoVEs have not capitalised on sectoral or regional opportunities to contribute to shaping or delivering demand-led provision, or proactively linked with other sectoral or regional initiatives.

- The **CoVE network has not significantly contributed to strengthening the FE offer** – with awareness of collaborative activity between CoVEs and other providers remaining limited, and suggesting that CoVEs could do more to disseminate good practice or encourage other provision to adopt innovative or improved practices.

4.3 **Success Factors**

Having reviewed the impacts on attitudes and the wider benefits of the programme identified in the study, a series of key success factors for the programme were identified by employers and stakeholders, as well as during the analysis of the survey findings. The success factors in effect serve as recommendations for individual CoVEs and the LSC, and in many areas replicate, and so reinforce, the factors identified in 2004, namely:
- **Continuing and developing responsiveness** to employer needs - by delivering on the factors that most strongly effect employers decision to work with a CoVE – namely tailored, flexibly timed and reasonably priced provision that is delivered by specialist teaching staff. The 2005 survey found positive evidence that CoVEs were having success in this particular area.

- **Promoting of the CoVE programme** - in terms of the range of services that CoVEs can offer employers, and by more widely disseminating CoVE achievements to key partners and stakeholders. While the survey findings suggest the CoVE brand is becoming recognised by employers in some areas at least, stakeholders remain largely uninformed of achievements of individual CoVEs and the network as a whole. Drawing wider attention to this will be essential if the programme is to influence attitude at the strategic level.

- **Maintaining a strong focus on delivering quality** – the employer survey also suggests that employers are increasing associating CoVEs (and the CoVE brand) with quality. If more employers are to be encouraged to train, it is essential that individual CoVEs continue deliver on this expectation and that equal levels of quality are available across the network. The engagement of stakeholders will also be supported by association with quality provision, and so be considered as an appropriate vehicle for the delivery of their strategic priorities.

- **Strengthening perceptions of CoVEs as demand led training providers** - while employers reported good progress in this area, stakeholders remained more cautious. Changing perceptions and experiences on this issue will depend on the entire CoVE network being focused on the delivery of this objective.

- **Maintaining employers’ engagement in the design of provision** – here employers using CoVEs and engaging with them in different ways reported highly positive experiences. This needs to continue and extend across the network to influence the practices of other training providers. Furthermore, this form of engagement will be essential for CoVE provision to address the factors influencing employers’ training decision-making.

- **Capturing and exploiting strategic partners’ willingness to engage** - there are clear signs that CoVEs have opportunities to play a strategic role in initiatives and programmes that aim to strengthen regional/sectoral training offers more widely. CoVEs need to make more of the channels that are available to them.

- **Evidencing achievement against national and regional skills priorities and agendas** - this remains a key issue, to enhance the network’s credibility amongst strategic stakeholders as well as raising the profile of the network more widely.