

# 14–19 success through collaborative working



Vocational education in the City of Sunderland has been given a new dimension and a major boost thanks to an innovative partnership between city schools and the local college. Ruth Hudspith of Sunderland LA explains how the collaborative joint-governance arrangement has opened up new choices for young people, promoted progression and given participants a flying start for the new Diplomas.

At the heart of the partnership are the joint governance arrangements between the City of Sunderland College and twelve out of fourteen of our 11–16 schools. Today the heads of the schools double up as vice-principals of the three new sixth-form colleges, established under the umbrella of the college, sitting on the college board and on various joint committees.



For young people moving from the 14–16 stage, the partnership has given them better advice and guidance so that they can progress with more confidence to courses suited to their aptitudes and, with the sharing of staff between schools and colleges, a better continuity of teaching.

The partnership has had a big and beneficial impact on vocational learning for 14–16 year olds. There are now two centres in Sunderland, converted from old primary schools, that serve all secondary schools in the city. By pooling resources the schools' heads have created industry-standard facilities in which college and school staff run courses at levels 1 and 2.

Currently learners can choose to take courses, whether for the applied GCSE or specific vocational qualifications, in engineering, construction, catering, logistics and motor vehicles. Run as business ventures, the centres offer a real workplace environment for learners, who will be able to apply their burgeoning skills as caterers or business managers for local companies which can use the centre's conference facilities.

Hand-in-hand with these initiatives has been the need to prepare for the new Diplomas. The partnership has successfully passed the Gateway for the first three Diplomas in engineering, construction and the built environment, and creative and media due on stream in 2008, with plans well advanced to pass through the Gateway for others as they come into operation.

To meet diploma requirements, the college is developing further its strong links with local employers who will contribute to the delivery of logistics and construction courses to 14–16 year old learners.

Again looking ahead to the Diplomas, the partnership aims to strengthen work experience for learners through closer links with employers where, thanks to their involvement in the centres, it should mean work experience is aligned more closely with the needs of courses and what young people need to learn. Here current progress with Young Apprentices in engineering and construction has been very encouraging.

Finally on planning for the Diplomas – and a measure of the strength of the partnership – each of the partner schools will be leading on one of the 14 Lines of Learning by chairing network groups which will bring together employers, work-based learning providers and college representatives.

There have been other benefits through the schools/college partnership which have sometimes been headaches to others planning joint initiatives. To transport learners from schools to vocational centres, headteachers have pooled resources. To date this has been largely successful, in part because Sunderland is a compact urban area with reasonably good public transport. However, this is likely to prove more of a challenge with the introduction of Diplomas when many more students will need to be moved.

And for the timetabling and management needs of vocational courses, the schools are grouped in four clusters with arrangements agreed by each cluster's key stage 4 curriculum managers who work closely with the centres' heads.

As the partnership develops to meet new opportunities, there are a number of areas which need to be addressed. Regarding funding for vocational courses, because work-based learning providers normally work with groups of no more than 15 learners, it puts



pressure on school budgets when the normal class sizes is around 30. And to help deal with pay and professional differences between school and college staff, the partnership is looking at upskilling vocational tutors to achieve qualified teacher status.

While there is more to be done, we believe the joint governance and collaborative management between the schools and college has produced a strong partnership where all participants can reach agreement in key areas, while playing to each other's strengths and giving the 14–19 year olds of Sunderland a sound basis for achievement.

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