14–19: Programme of Support for Delivery of Change on the Ground

vocational tasters: a guide
vocational tasters: a guide
## Contents

1. Vocational tasters and the broader curriculum ............................................. 1
2. What are vocational taster programmes? ......................................................... 3
3. Why vocational tasters? .................................................................................. 6
4. The benefits of vocational tasters ................................................................. 8
5. Vocational tasters for transition at 14 .......................................................... 10
6. Vocational tasters for transition to post-16 education and training ............ 15
7. Vocational tasters for progression from the 14–19 phase ......................... 21
8. Key issues in setting up a vocational taster programme ......................... 23

References ........................................................................................................ 32
Acknowledgements

This guide was written by Neil Ritchie and edited by Professor Andrew Miller of Active Learning Research Associates for the Learning and Skills Network’s Vocational Learning Support Programme.
**1 Vocational tasters and the broader curriculum**

One of the key priorities for the government in its February 2005 White Paper *14–19 education and skills* (DfES 2005a) was to develop stronger vocational routes for young people in the 14–19 age range. The timetable and detailed plans for these changes are set out in the *14–19 education and skills implementation plan* (DfES 2005b), published in December 2005. These included plans for a new learner entitlement to study one of 14 vocational areas in the form of specialised Diplomas. The *14–19 implementation plan* estimated that the number of 14–16 year olds studying qualifications other than traditional GCSEs will increase from 25% of the cohort now to around 40% by 2013.

Before the White Paper, the 14–19 Pathfinder Programme (which ran from January 2003 to August 2005) tested out different approaches to broadening the curriculum through collaboration between schools, colleges and training providers. This, in turn, built on the experiences of the Increased Flexibility Programme for 14–16 year olds, in which Key stage 4 students attend colleges for part of their curriculum to study a range of GCSEs in vocational subjects and other vocationally related qualifications. The Young Apprenticeship (YA) Programme, with its 50 days of work placement on employers’ premises, is another Key stage 4 vocational programme that requires students to make difficult option choices.

In the emerging 14–19 phase there are three points of transition where high-quality information, advice and guidance (IAG) will be critical:

- **in Year 9**, when students aged 14 have to decide on their options, which now may include GCSEs in vocational subjects, other vocationally related qualifications and Young Apprenticeships, but in future will include specialised Diplomas; part of their curriculum may be delivered by employers in workplaces, by lecturers in further education (FE) colleges or by instructors at work-based learning providers.

- **in Year 11**, when students must decide which pathway to follow after the end of compulsory schooling and whether to stay in their own school or move to a college or Apprenticeship.

- **in Year 13**, when some students may want to consider an Apprenticeship or perhaps vocational courses on offer in higher education (HE).
**How do young people choose?**

How can young people make such important choices on the basis of reading brochures or listening to talks in their schools?

Vocational taster programmes are increasingly being used across the country as a means of informing young people aged 14–19 about their increased choices. These taster programmes vary in their objectives, duration and processes, but they share a desire to give young people some experience of the vocational programme before they make a firm commitment.

The aim of this guide is to help providers set up taster programmes to meet the needs of the students, but also to avoid the costs associated with students embarking on the wrong vocational programmes. The advice is based on the experience of practitioners who have developed taster programmes in the past few years. Many of the case studies were obtained directly from the practitioners involved and others came from 14–19 Pathfinders.
What are vocational taster programmes?

A vocational taster is a short or phased programme which aims to provide the young people with knowledge and experience of a particular vocational area, with the possibility that they will progress onto a full-time vocational programme at a later date.

Types of programme

Vocational taster programmes vary according to their:

- scope and size
- aims
- timing, duration and phasing
- location
- facilitator – whoever runs them
- form.

Scope and size

The large-scale taster might be organised across a local authority area involving several schools with hundreds of students having a choice of several tasters. On the other hand, small-scale tasters can be arranged by one school and one provider for a small group interested in a particular vocational course.

Aims

Typical aims of tasters are to allow the following kinds of students to learn from the experience:

- Year 9 students – to learn about vocational options at Key stage 4
- Year 10/11 students – to learn about vocational options in Year 11 or post-16
- Year 12 students on Entry level qualifications and other Foundation level or Level 1 programmes – to learn about progression opportunities
- Year 12/13 high achievers – to learn about A-level (or equivalent) recruitment programmes with employers or vocational opportunities in HE institutions.
Timing, duration and phasing

The taster could, typically, be a one-off experience lasting for half a day to two weeks, or it might be phased over a term or year as a series of sessions.

Location

Most often tasters take place in an FE college or work-based learning provider but they can also be held on employers’ premises or in neutral territory such as hotels. While vocational taster programmes can take place on school premises the main focus of this manual will be on ‘off-site’ provision. However, many of the issues raised will be relevant to schools providing vocational programmes themselves.

Facilitator

The facilitator of a vocational taster programme can be a school, college, work-based learning provider, 14–19 partnership or collaborative, the Connexions Service, or an agency such as Springboard UK (an industry-funded organisation to promote careers in the hospitality and tourism sector), a Sector Skills Council such as the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB), or a local Educational Business Link Organisation (EBLO).

Form

Vocational taster programmes can take a variety of different forms and be delivered on-site or off-site. The most common types of taster programmes currently being offered include:

- **School-based simulations.** College and work-based learning staff or employers visit schools and provide a simulated vocational learning experience, sometimes with the aid of additional resources such as those provided by mobile units.

- **Classroom-based visits.** School groups or individual students visit a local college or work-based learning provider with the intention of experiencing one or more vocational taster programmes.

- **Work shadowing or work experience.** School groups or individual students visit an employer to experience a particular job or to shadow a young worker or apprentice before they make a commitment to a period of extended work experience, perhaps as part of a YA Programme.

- **Structured tasters.** School-aged students spend longer but intermittent periods of time over Year 10 or Year 11 at an FE college, work-based learning provider or an employer, with the intention of progressing post-16 into the same or similar vocational area.
■ **Sector competitions and other tasters.** Students are invited to take part on particular vocational taster programmes run by Sector Skills Councils (such as CITB) or other agencies, for example, Springboard UK’s Future Chef programme.

■ **Virtual tasters.** E-learning may present another method by which the working environment or particular vocational areas can be simulated in the school classroom. With the increase in internet access and video-conferencing in the classroom, schools may find this an attractive alternative to taking students ‘off-site’.

The tasters discussed in this guide are those that involve students going off-site to a college, work-based learning provider or employer. However, there are other experiences and activities within a work-related learning and enterprise programme in Key stage 4 that in effect give young people a taste of a particular vocational area. These include:

■ enterprise or industry days
■ business mentoring
■ problem-solving activities
■ work simulations and role plays
■ entrepreneurship master classes
■ talks by employers
■ virtual reality placements
■ work experience
■ work shadowing
■ ‘take your son/daughter to work’ days
■ visits to workplaces.

These are excluded from this discussion on the grounds that they may provide a general insight into a vocational area, but they are not linked to a particular progression route, programme or course.
Before introducing a vocational taster programme it is important for schools, colleges and their partners to have a clear rationale, a response to the questions: ‘Why tasters? How will vocational tasters better meet the needs of young people?’

When introducing new courses to students at the end of Key stages 3, 4 or 5 it is important that they fully understand the type of course or programme to which they will be committing themselves. This is especially important if the teaching and learning style are likely to be very different from what they are accustomed to. Vocational tasters can be viewed as a key part of the school’s programme of careers education and/or information, advice and guidance. Improved IAG is recognised as a key part of the 14–19 reforms and the development of the 14–19 phase.

Students making choices at age 14 already have experience in many of the standard school academic subjects and usually heads of departments of ‘new’ subjects in schools make particular efforts to get their subject areas across to young people. However, when the vocational programme is ‘off-site’, then students face a steeper learning curve. Vocational taster programmes, properly planned and organised, can offer young people the opportunity to understand the full implications of their choices.

The Ofsted report *Increased Flexibility Programme at Key stage 4* (May 2005) found that:

*Students find college promotional materials, open evenings and direct experience of college courses to be the most useful sources of information to help them make choices about their future.*

Young people may need to familiarise themselves with a new:

- vocational subject area
- working environment containing, perhaps, more adults
- teaching and learning style
- assessment procedures
- codes of conduct
- travel arrangements.
A lack of understanding of these issues and a mismatch between the students' abilities, needs and aspirations and the provision being offered may lead to disillusionment and, later, drop out. Young people with learning disabilities or special needs may need additional support, guidance and direct experience to make informed decisions about their employment or progression opportunities.

The type of vocational taster programme needs to be matched to the needs of the students concerned. Some vocational taster experiences, for example, would not be appropriate for Year 9 students and others would not meet the needs of disaffected or disengaged students.
When making a case for vocational tasters it is important to be able to define the benefits such programmes will bring to the school, the student and the provider. There are many potential benefits to be gained by all parties in offering vocational tasters.

Schools can benefit because:

- students, parents/carers/guardians will have a better understanding of the choices being made
- teachers will have a better understanding of college provision and vocational learning in general
- collaborative partnership working will be enhanced
- teachers will develop a better understanding of the needs of their students and ‘off-site’ providers
- schools will be able to forge new links with colleges, training providers and employers.

Students can benefit through:

- being better informed about the choices being made, which include vocational subject area, learning styles, assessment procedures, and so on
- being made more aware of progression routes and the opportunities available in their locality
- having greater familiarity with the new working environment, its codes of conduct, and travel arrangements
- having a greater appreciation of the more adult atmosphere at college or training providers
- having increased levels of confidence about their future destination
- being more likely to progress onto a vocational course at the right level, with a greater likelihood that they will succeed
- developing a better idea of their job and workplace preferences
- having a better understanding of what help they need connected to work, for example travel to work, break times, ability to cope socially.
Providers will benefit through:

- having a greater knowledge and understanding of the needs and abilities of the students
- reduced drop-out rate
- improved partnership working
- having an increased capacity to influence schools’ selection of students to avoid the possibility of being sent disaffected students uninterested in the vocational area
- having an opportunity to assess the students for aptitude and suitability
- there being an increased likelihood that students will take up the course offer.
Vocational tasters for transition at 14

Key stage 3 – tasters linked to option choices

In this section case studies are included of different types of vocational taster arranged for students towards the end of Key stage 3. Vocational tasters tend to be closely linked to the process of choosing options or pathways.

Year 9 careers/option choice programmes usually begin in the spring term. Typically, students receive option booklets detailing the choices they need to make, within their own school and at local colleges, if link courses exist. These programmes are usually delivered by careers or form tutors, or personal advisers, and are supplemented by additional careers information provided by Connexions, for instance the Which way now booklet. Connexions Personal Advisers will be working with ‘at risk students’ and others identified by the school, and can help the school identify students for particular vocational programmes.

Parents’ evenings are a critical element of the whole option choice programme and it is good practice for Connexions Personal Advisers, local FE colleges, work-based learning providers and employers to be invited to attend. There are examples of schools engaging employers, colleges and work-based learning providers in the IAG process at the Key stage 3 option choice stage. This has the added advantage of bringing some ‘realism’ into the preparation programme for choosing options and giving the young people current information and understanding of local career opportunities. The case study of the City of Nottingham 14–19 Pathfinder is an example of a school-based taster based on enhanced IAG.
**Case study 1. Vocational curriculum days in Nottingham**

The City of Nottingham 14–19 Pathfinder worked with mainstream schools to organise and develop a series of vocational curriculum days, offering taster workshops to raise young people’s aspirations and support informed decision-making for their Key stage 4 curriculum at their Year 9 options sessions. Speakers from the community, employers and training providers gave presentations on career pathways. For example, the Nottingham City Hospital Patient Pathway enabled over 60 young people to discuss how individual health care staff developed their own career pathways. Other employers and mentors in the workplace provided direct IAG to young people on a range of different local jobs. The programme has now been integrated into the annual options events at the schools. As part of this programme, the Pathfinder also organised a series of vocational taster workshops for employers to deliver to special education needs (SEN) students at special schools.

(Source: Manual of Good Practice from 14–19 Pathfinders)

Students considering taking part in the Increased Flexibility Programme or a YA Programme off-site require much more direct, practical experience in addition to good-quality IAG. A good example of vocational taster sessions for potential students on these programmes is provided by Leeds Technology College.

**Case study 2. College-based tasters linked to the Increased Flexibility Programme or a YA Programme**

Through the Leeds Further Forward 14–19 partnership, Leeds College of Technology, in conjunction with three other colleges, runs general taster programmes for students selecting vocational options at the end of Key stage 3. Leeds Technology College offer half-day tasters throughout the year in motor vehicle for potential Increased Flexibility Programme students and a longer programme for potential YA students. The basic half-day taster includes hands-on experience when students are asked to make a ‘key fob’. A second half-day session is provided if requested. The potential YA students spend a day in the college and this follows visits to the schools, information for parents and meeting work-based learning providers. The period at college is also used as a ‘vetting’ opportunity to assess whether the students’ needs and abilities will be met by the course. The college currently has a third cohort of students on the YA programme who are working successfully at Level 2. This was not the case with previous cohorts because schools had misconceptions about the ability level required to succeed on YA programmes and motor vehicle was seen as a motivating programme for less able or disengaged students. Local schools now have a better understanding of the demands of YA and equivalent Level 2 programmes.

(Source: Kevin Lawson, Head of Motor Vehicle and Engineering, Leeds College of Technology)
Employers through Sector Skills Councils can also take a lead in developing vocational tasters. Nationally, CITB has generated many different local partnerships which offer ‘hands on’ experience in construction taster sessions for Year 9 students considering the Construction and Built Environment GCSE (in its pilot stage until 2008) and other construction courses. The tasters are also designed to generate awareness of opportunities at the craft, technical and professional levels.

Case study 3. Sector Skills Council taster

CITB is usually approached by a school, local authority, Education Business Partnership (EBP) or 14–19 partnership whom they then support by linking the school(s) in question with a local FE college, work-based learning provider or employer. CITB has a step-by-step approach which it offers as guidance to schools. This reminds the schools about the ‘open and free’ access policy designed to ensure that the programmes are made available to the entire ability range. The intention is to make all young people aware of the wide range of career opportunities available in construction, including craft and technical-based subjects through to professional services. In fact, CITB encourages whole year groups to become involved in the taster sessions. Students typically gain practical experience in areas such as brickwork, painting and decorating, carpentry and surveying. The taster programmes are set up so that young people receive at least two craft and one professional experience. If a second day is used then a series of site visits can be incorporated into the programme. Group sizes of 15 are recommended. It is common for the construction taster programmes to be over-subscribed so CITB provides application forms, which enable the students to ‘argue their case’ and give teachers information on which to base their selection decisions.

(Source: Sue Goodwin. Education Manager, CITB, Construction Skills, Greater London area)

Sometimes competitions can be used as vocational tasters. Some agencies that promote careers in particular industries such as Springboard UK (hospitality, leisure, tourism and travel) offer programmes to schools. These are targeted at students with an interest in these vocational areas but they can be used as an opportunity to increase general career awareness.
**Case study 4. Industry competitions – Future Chef**

Springboard UK’s Future Chef programme, which is run as a competition from October to March, is aimed at 12–16 year olds across the UK (for more details visit www.springboarduk.org.uk/futurechef/). In the 2005/06 programme 5871 pupils from 581 schools took part. Flyers are sent out to all secondary schools in the UK and usually subject teachers in catering and food technology departments together with heads of careers or heads of years respond and put forward students' names. The first series of ‘heats’ take place in the students’ schools and as young people progress through the competition they attend local colleges and receive the support of mentor chefs. In this way they experience the college environment and can talk about a career in the industry with their mentor. The current 2006 competition has 11 finalists (4 boys, 7 girls) from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Education Business Partnerships are viewed as key partners to support this programme.

(Source: John Humphreys, Development Director, Springboard UK)

---

**Young Apprenticeship tasters**

The YA Programme, which began in September 2004, provides an opportunity for 14–16 year olds to apply their skills and knowledge practically in a vocational context as they study for qualifications at Level 2 that relate to particular occupational sectors. Students are based in school but spend one or two days each week in college, with training providers or employers, and work towards nationally recognised vocational qualifications delivered by their local Young Apprenticeship partnership. The young person is entitled to 50 days' work experience or work-related learning. The YA Programme is a major commitment on the part of students who need considerable guidance and support during Year 9 before they make their choices. A vocational taster programme at the local college, work-based learning provider or employer is an essential element of any preparation programme. The Royal Bank of Scotland is piloting a YA Programme with Newall Green High School, South Manchester.
Case study 5. Young Apprenticeship in business administration tasters as selection

The Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) is piloting a YA Programme with Newall Green High School, which will commence in September 2006. Students will spend one day each week at the Bank’s central Manchester offices following an NVQ Level 2 programme in business administration. Over 50 students in Year 9 have shown interest in the programme and RBS is offering 18 places. Criteria for selection include: having a good school attendance record, a minimum 14 points SATs score, interest in commerce and banking, and a positive form tutor assessment. The remaining students are then interviewed by RBS staff, Wythenshawe Action Zone and JHT Training, and references are taken up for successful candidates. RBS then allocates a mentor for each successful student and attends school-based parent consultation meetings. Students are then invited to the RBS’s central Manchester offices to experience various aspects of working life in a bank’s offices and the programme will be launched in June 2006. Wythenshawe Action Zone has arranged for JHT Training to provide students with a preparation programme which focuses on self-esteem, confidence building and employability skills. The students will be invited to visit the bank’s Manchester offices over the summer holiday when they will meet their mentors before they begin in September. These taster experiences provide students with the opportunity to find out a lot more about working at RBS.

(Source: John Gregory, Assistant Headteacher, Newall Green High School, and Louise King, Community Investment Manager, RBS)
Vocational tasters for transition to post-16 education and training

Vocational taster programmes are mainly used with Key stage 4 students to inform them about post-16 options. They vary widely depending on funding and partnership arrangements and local priorities. The local authority Barking and Dagenham is well known for having pioneered vocational programmes in the past. Vocational taster programmes are seen as an important part of the local learner entitlement.

Case study 6.

A local authority coordinated taster programme

Barking and Dagenham local authority has 10 secondary schools for ages 11–18, including one school for students with additional needs. Each school’s Year 11 students are offered a one-day vocational taster programme at one of three local colleges, a borough work-based learning provider and a commercial provider specialising in hair and beauty. They take place in February. The work-related learning section of the local authority provides schools with a list of all vocational tasters and a professionally produced form for students to complete indicating their preferences. The students select two from a large range of options, which include hairdressing, early years, construction, motor vehicle, catering, technology, business and the media. Many of the students will have been interviewed by Connexions Personal Advisers who also support them by accompanying them on the college taster days. Students receive health and safety induction and complete one taster in the morning, and a second in the afternoon. Evaluation consists of feedback from stakeholders (schools, students and college staff), later written up in a report, which contains recommendations for the following year’s programme. Approximately 320 students took part in the taster programme in 2006.

In recent years the development of 14–19 vocational skills centres provides an ideal location and rationale for vocational tasters. Knowsley Community College in Lancashire offers taster days for Year 10 students and follows them up with visits in Year 11 to the schools. The College developed the first vocational skills centre for 14–16 year olds and this facilitates progression onto post-16 vocational programmes.
Case study 7. Tasters at a vocational skills centre

England's first dedicated vocational skills centre for 14–16 year olds based at Knowsley Community College (www.knowsleycollege.ac.uk/) offers a very comprehensive range of vocational provision for pre and post-16 students. The Centre provides a half-day vocational taster programme to Year 10 students from seven or eight schools (the focus is on Year 10 because schools are reluctant to release students in Year 11 and those in Year 9 are considered to be too ‘immature’); this usually takes place over the last three weeks of the summer term. Students are informed via their schools of the wide range of vocational options available post-16 and they prioritise three different vocational areas, one of which they learn more about on their morning college visit. In the previous year the taster programme lasted a whole day, but it was felt that students could not sustain their concentration levels for that length of time so a compromise was reached. Over 300 students were involved in last year’s taster programme. The College follows up the Year 10 taster programme by visiting Year 11 students at school, which builds on the students’ knowledge and awareness of local post-16 vocational opportunities. Students evaluate the tasters by completing questionnaires, and there is some informal discussion with schools.

(Source: John Ryan, Student Services Manager, Knowsley Community College)

Most tasters involve one-off half-day or one-day sessions. However, the Durham 14–19 Pathfinder developed a phased taster programme lasting a whole year. This process enabled the selection of students for Apprenticeship programmes in the construction industry.
Case study 8. A ‘phased’ taster programme leading to Apprenticeships

Durham 14–19 Pathfinder set up the Fit 4 Employment project, which developed a transition route for Year 11 students from school to college by offering them access to a three-week phased programme over the year, leading to an Apprenticeship with a large construction business. In the 2004/05 project the first week, during the autumn term, took place at the construction training centre when 120 students spent time mainly on developing their employability and generic skills. The second week, in the spring term, resulted in 60 students working in small groups (40% of them young women) focusing on skills related to particular construction jobs – joinery, plumbing, landscaping and quantity surveying. The third and final week took place late in the summer term, after the students had left school, when 30 students were offered the opportunity of work experience on construction sites. Each student was paired with an employee of the construction business and undertook appropriate activity relating to the employee’s work. At the end of the project 20 students were offered Apprenticeship programmes with the construction firm. The participating students reported that they had enjoyed working at the training centre and at the company’s main site. The model of this project, with a series of connected ‘weeks’ in which student numbers are reduced throughout the programme leading to a number of job offers, is one that the local authority wants to develop in other areas of the county.

A particular strength of Fit 4 Employment was the support and advice offered to the participating students through the Connexions Service. A Connexions Personal Adviser worked with all the students throughout all phases making them aware of their individual styles of working, supporting them in applying for the project and in progressing from one stage to the next. The project also provided a high level of support to four students with special educational needs, enabling them to be integrated with mainstream students in the second phase. These students were supported to complete basic skills tests.

(Source: Durham 14–19 Pathfinder)
Challenging gender stereotyping

Gender stereotyping remains a significant issue with work experience, Increased Flexibility and YA programmes. The Equal Opportunities Commission and the Women and Work Commission have drawn attention to the need for more proactive work to be carried out on challenging gender stereotypes. The vocational areas in which job segregation has persisted – construction, engineering, plumbing, ICT and childcare, for example – all suffer from skills shortages.

Schools and colleges can encourage more girls to make non-traditional choices of vocational courses, perhaps by running events, involving Sector Skills Councils and/or local employers, to educate students about the benefits of working in non-traditional jobs and providing single-sex taster courses, on-site or at local colleges or training organisations.

The Sector Skills Council for construction, CITB, runs girls-only taster courses in school, in carpentry and joinery, brickwork, electrical installation, surveying and operating a mini-digger. Industrial visits, hosted by positive role models, can also enthuse students. The Women into the Built Environment project in South Yorkshire has developed tasters to challenge gender stereotyping and to encourage girls and young women interested in careers in construction, science, engineering and technology.
Case study 9. **Non-traditional occupational tasters (1)**

Schools in the South Yorkshire area benefit from Women into the Built Environment (WITBE), which is a partnership between Sheffield Hallam University, the South Yorkshire Women's Development Trust, the UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology and others. WITBE provides professional guidance for women and girls interested in careers in construction, science, engineering and technology. One of the taster events for girls take place at the Women's Construction Centre and is for one afternoon each week over at least one term where girls get ‘hands on experience’ in the construction trades leading to an Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) qualification. Although the programme is open to all girls the schools choose to target ‘at risk’ students as part of their inclusion agenda. Another programme, ‘Girls’ Day’, provides female role models from non-traditional careers. Girls get hands-on experience in computer-aided design software when they design a brick archway and then build an archway out of bricks. Another one-day programme in partnership with CITB (part of National Science Week) gives girls of all abilities the opportunity of a craft, technical and professional taster in the construction industry. A similarly organised project encourages boys into health and social care careers.

(Source: Denise Eaton, Outreach and Development Co-ordinator, Women in SET Team, Sheffield Hallam University)

Case study 10. **Non-traditional occupational tasters (2)**

In March 2005 the UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology based in Bradford, in conjunction with Bradford College and 10 local schools, ran the Brighter Futures Programme, which was aimed at disadvantaged boys and girls at Key stage 4. The programme involved students spending at least two days a week at Bradford College on a range of vocational courses; girls were targeted for the construction and motor vehicle programme, for which a series of two ‘taster days’ were arranged. Girls were told about the range of careers in construction, engineering and technology and what it was like to work in a male-dominated industry. They were given practical activities in plumbing, fabrication and welding and motor vehicle. Of the 22 girls taking part at least six began the programme, most of them in motor vehicle. Although project evaluation indicated that the impact of the programme was low, it was recognised that attitudes to women working in non-traditional areas are slowly changing. This programme is no longer being offered, because of changes in funding, but the Centre is now working with local EBPs to arrange work placements for girls in non-traditional areas.

(Source: Jasmine Ali / Jeanette McMurdo)
Students with special needs

Many special schools with students with moderate or severe learning difficulties have developed ‘link’ courses with colleges and work-based learning providers so that 15–19-year-old students in their last years of school are prepared for the transition to FE colleges, adult education centres or training providers by attending taster programmes every week over a period of time, sometimes a year.

Case study 11. Extended college tasters for students with special needs

Southwark College in London runs taster programmes for special needs students as part of its Increased Flexibility Programme. Starting in Year 10, students go to college for half a day each week for 18 weeks and take catering, followed in the second half of the year by woodwork. In Year 11 the same group from the special school go into college for one and a half days each week over a six-week period and choose from catering, travel and tourism, 3D art, woodwork, health and social care, and fabrics. The options are then rotated so that each student experiences them all over the three terms. All students compile portfolios, which are used for ASDAN accreditation. At least 40–50% of these students transfer to Southwark College post-16 and enrol on the Entry to Employment (E2E) course ‘Skills for Working Life’, when they are offered catering, care, and art and design. Some students at the special school stay in school for an extra year but still continue their link with the college by attending one day a week over three 10-week periods, tasting options in catering, performing arts and travel and tourism.

(Source: Terry O’Regan, Schools Link Co-ordinator, Southwark College)
Vocational tasters for progression from the 14–19 phase

Students on Level 1 and 2 courses in schools will generally need to transfer to college or begin work-based training after one year. Because of time pressures and other concerns it is rare for Year 12 students in schools on these type of programmes to be offered vocational taster programmes at other centres, other than simply pre-arranged visits. Where it does occur, students are often taking units (or parts of units) of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), which lead on to full accreditation after transition to college or work-based learning.

Case study 12. Post-16 vocational Apprenticeship tasters

Post-16 tasters in West Cumbria started out as a way of enabling Level 2 sixth formers to follow a collaborative mode of study by adding a further qualification into the sixth form offer (which was generally Intermediate General NVQ (GNVQ) plus GCSEs). This programme was developed by identifying elements of Apprenticeship programmes that could be funded for sixth formers. This included the ‘technical certificate’ and meant that students who wished to explore vocational options could obtain a qualification that would count towards a future Apprenticeship programme by joining a group of apprentices for up to the equivalent of one day a week. The option was introduced by the offer of a half-day ‘vocational taster’ in September, which was appreciated by the participating sixth formers. Following a peer research survey, which confirmed our suspicions, we recognised that these young people needed to undertake their ‘tasters’ earlier, as they were often undecided about post-16 routes and so some ‘fell into’ one year sixth form provision, rather than making a vocational choice. So it was felt that in future the tasters should form part of the Year 11 Careers Education and Work Related Learning programme, to enable enough time for planning and timetabling this option for the sixth form.

(Source: Cumbria 14–19 Pathfinder and Connexions Cumbria (West))

Sector Skills Councils and other employer organisations can offer vocational tasters to encourage young people to consider careers in their sector. For example, another type of taster programme offered by Springboard UK is targeted at school or college leavers considering careers in the hospitality sector.
Case study 13. **Industry-led summer school**

Springboard UK runs a three-week summer school for 16–19 year olds who are seriously considering a career in hospitality. In the first week there is initial training, including in health and safety, food hygiene and customer care, and help and advice is given on careers in the industry. Then students have two weeks of paid work placements over the summer. Applicants have to go through a selection process involving a personal interview before they can be accepted onto the programme.

14–19 taster programmes

Wolverhampton’s 14–19 Development Team has developed a comprehensive programme, which aims to give 14–19 learners a taste of different subject areas and organisations, and to provide real experience on which they can base decisions about further study, training and career choices. In 2005, over 90 taster activities for Year 10 students alone were available in a range of subjects, including science, IT, health, law, construction, engineering, sport and business. The taster activities took place across the West Midlands and were organised by a wide range of providers. Choose a Real Deal (CARD) days are part of a long-term programme in Wolverhampton that aims, through active engagement, to give youngsters a clear understanding of where they want to go and what they need to do to get there.

Case study 14. **Choose a Real Deal days**

Choose a Real Deal days were developed by the Wolverhampton 14–19 Development Team. They represent a 14–19 agreement that develops a personalised progression path for a learner’s future. They combines a ‘promise’ for the future and a ‘process’ that gives learners access to a programme of activities to test out their aspirations. The range of CARD activities for Year 10 to Year 13 covers agriculture, arts, business, car maintenance, child care and health, through to music, psychology and science. CARD days for year groups are supported by Aimhigher and include 70–80 activities with more than 1000 students taking part on each day. They include work with universities, FE colleges, schools and a range of employers across the West Midlands. CARD days are aimed at students considering Young and Student Apprenticeships, the Increased Flexibility Programme, and post-16 academic and vocational choices. They are designed for learners of all abilities and interests, allowing them to investigate many possible career areas and pathways through education and training.

(Source: www.wolverhampton.gov.uk/education).
8 Key issues in setting up a vocational taster programme

Should a collaborative vocational taster programme be set up covering, for example, a local authority area, School Improvement partnership, the Increased Flexibility Programme or a Young Apprenticeship partnership?

This question requires a decision to be made about the scope of the taster programme. This is an issue for 14–19 collaborative groups to consider when developing and implementing the learner entitlement. In the long term, it would be more cost-effective to plan and run coordinated vocational taster programmes for 14-plus and 16-plus transition than to allow or encourage a plethora of ‘bilateral’ programmes. Individual schools should find out if an overall programme is planned for their area and make sure that any planning takes into account the needs of their students.

An issue for 14–19 partnerships is the funding of a large-scale taster programme. There would be some coordination and marketing costs. However, it would be important for providers offering the tasters to meet the delivery costs, as they will ultimately benefit from receiving students that are less likely to drop out from the courses they begin.

Is there a need for an off-site vocational taster programme?

There are several circumstances when the answer to this question might be ‘No’. Sometimes schools and their partners may think it unnecessary to arrange a taster programme. There are some vocational courses, for example, GCSE Applied Business or ICT, where the pedagogy and course content is not that different from other courses available in school. However, students may benefit, for example, from experiencing the environment of a college before committing themselves to a two-year GCSE course. Some schools may have careers education programmes at Key stage 3 which give students a good insight into their vocational options. Students on the Increased Flexibility Programme are more familiar with the local colleges and particular departments and so may not need a taster in order to progress to post-16 provision. Some courses may have a very limited number of places on offer compared with the demand, and so they may feel that organising tasters are a waste of resources for them. Some schools may decide that it is preferable to offer an indirect experience, for example, through arranging speakers from the college or training provider, showing DVDs and answering questions to give students an understanding of what is on offer. Another approach would be to invite current and former students to talk about their own experiences and to answer questions.
On the other hand, there are different circumstances when there might be a need for an off-site vocational taster programme. A vocational taster programme for Year 9 students is desirable if they have limited understanding of the choices they are being asked to make. There may also be no substantial careers education programme in Year 9 or it might be part of a carousel whereby some students are given information, advice and guidance on careers long before or long after they have to make option choices. There may be minimal vocational provision in the school so students can gain little insight from observing their peers in vocational lessons and workshops. The school may have limited access to information, advice and guidance for most of the cohort. There may have been previous experience of students starting off-site courses and then wanting to change or drop out. Parents may be resistant to their children opting for off-site vocational provision and may need persuading based on direct experience by their child (or themselves if a visit is offered). An off-site taster may be unnecessary where providers have some form of mobile vocational skills centre, or if lecturers can visit the school to talk and arrange demonstrations.

**Should there be a general or a specific, targeted vocational taster programme?**

A general programme is most appropriate in situations where there are many vocational opportunities, several providers and several schools involved. As areas introduce the learner entitlement and the specialised Diplomas are introduced from 2008, it is likely that vocational tasters will be seen as an essential means of ‘putting learners first’. General taster programmes involve presenting students with a menu of choices from which they can select one or more. They are appropriate for general awareness-raising in situations where students have a low level of understanding of what vocational options mean. This will be the case especially with Year 9 students. Typically students might experience two or more vocational areas in which they are interested to help them make up their minds.

A specific, targeted taster programme are appropriate for students who have an idea about what vocational pathway they would like to follow, but who also need some direct experience to confirm their commitment to the choice. It may be that only a small number of students need a vocational taster and that individual visits can be arranged in which they can observe or shadow existing students for a day or part of a day.
What is the best time to run the taster programme?

Timing of vocational taster programmes is critical. Best practice shows that February or March is the best time for Year 9 or Year 11 students to take part in these programmes. The option choice programme at the end of Key stage 3 in many schools usually begins in the spring term. Students are presented with option choice booklets, which must include all of the vocational choices either within school or off-site. To include information about vocational taster programmes at the option choice stage requires very early planning, whether it is aimed at Key stage 3 students or students in their final year of school. Only if this happens will schools transmit the message that vocational progression routes are as important as the academic routes.

Regrettably some schools choose not to release students in Year 11 to take part in vocational taster programmes because of impending GCSEs. However, when tasters are placed at the end of the summer term, it is often too late for colleges or work-based learning providers to make appropriate provision. It can also be too late for any students who have remained in the school’s sixth form through inertia, because there did not seem to be a suitable alternative. The autumn term of Year 11 would be a good time to offer vocational tasters leading to post-16 progression.

What form of vocational taster should be offered?

The form of the taster is often governed by factors outside a school’s control. For example, a general taster programme may be offered through the local 14–19 partnership. Whether or not lecturers are able to visit the school for demonstrations and talks, sometimes with a mobile unit, depends on resources at the college. The development of classroom-based simulations and virtual tasters also depends on the availability of good quality resources. The chance to participate in industry-led competitions or visits depends in part on actions taken by employers and organisations representing employers. Elaborate and phased tasters are generally developed in response to the need to sift student applicants to ensure those students who show most aptitude and are most committed to a vocational area gain a limited place.

The most common form of taster is likely to be where students go off-site to observe and participate in some form of vocational course or Apprenticeship provision. Many schools organise ‘de-timetabled’ or ‘drop’ days when the timetable is suspended so that students can go off-site for visits or take part in enterprise or work-related learning days. One of these days could be allocated for the vocational taster programme. Students could go on two half-day visits or visit different vocational workshops taking place at the local college.
What is the lead-in time and what are key tasks in planning a vocational taster programme?

There are a number of tasks associated with planning a general vocational taster programme. The schedule shown in Table 8.1 was based on a plan for a consortium of schools, colleges and work-based learning providers offering Key stage 4 vocational taster programmes as part of the Cumbria 14–19 Pathfinder.

**Table 8.1. A planning schedule for a vocational taster programme**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>Providers plan their offer for the fortnight before February half-term and to provide draft application form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Completion of draft taster programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All schools to receive draft programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schools to negotiate with Connexions whether whole year group or targeted students should be considered for vocational taster programmes and provide list of names at earliest opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schools inform parents of vocational programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview process with personal advisers to begin at earliest opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>School and college staff briefing sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finalisation of programmes, proformas and fliers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Providers to risk assess their offers of vocational taster programmes and distribute to schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>Students and parents to be issued with any fliers, information sheets and application forms relating to vocational taster programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schools assess numbers of students involved in taster programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transport is arranged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Students are reminded of taster programmes by form tutors and in assemblies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students present completed application forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students (and their parents) notified if they will be taking part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>Vocational taster will take place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation forms completed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Cumbria 14–19 Pathfinder)
How are students selected for vocational tasters?

General vocational tasters are usually open to all students based on their level of interest. Nevertheless it is desirable to avoid time-wasting by marketing attendance as a privilege rather than a right. It is a good idea to ask students to articulate the reasons why they would like to attend a particular taster programme. In an ideal world, students would have some discussion about progression and whether a taster programme would be appropriate with a Connexions Personal Adviser, careers teacher or form tutor.

The Increased Flexibility Programme at many colleges has been oversubscribed so schools and providers have had to select students before each programme. Selection can take place through targeting, individual interviews, application forms, teacher or tutor assessments. Vocational tasters can also be used as a means of selecting students for their suitability for particular programmes.

There will be other situations especially in targeted vocational tasters where there are a lot more students wanting to take up a vocational programme with a restricted number of places. In these circumstances schools need to work closely with their partners who are providing the opportunities to devise fair and transparent procedures to select students. Clear criteria should be established, for example, including minimum levels of achievement, attendance records, behaviour, motivation, commitment and vocational aspirations.

For example, Newall Green High School in South Manchester has been working with the Royal Bank of Scotland to develop a YA Programme in business administration. Because of the popularity of the programme the school had to select from an original group of 58 interested students and whittle that figure down to just 18 places. The school met RBS staff, JHT Training and Wythenshawe Education Action Zone personnel to plan and organise the programme over the spring and summer term, leading to a launch in June (see Table 8.2). The school and its partners thought carefully about the selection criteria and planned a staged process whereby students considered unsuitable for the programme were de-selected.
Table 8.2. A planning schedule for vocational tasters and selection of students for a YA Programme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| January | ■ Presentation about the YA programme in school assembly  
■ 58 interested students put their names forward (out of a total year group of 180)  
■ Form tutors were asked to assess applicants for suitability and this reduced the total to 50  
■ SATs results (criterion: minimum of 14 points) reduced the total to 41  
■ After reviewing attendance figures (at least 90% required) the total was reduced to 33  
■ Final assessment by head of year reduced the total to 30 |
| February | ■ Information, flyers and explanatory letters were distributed to students and parents  
■ Parents were invited to a parents’ evening in March with RBS, JHT Training and representatives from Wythenshawe Action Zone |
| March | ■ School parents’ evening |
| April | ■ Students interviewed by a panel consisting of RBS, JHT Training and representatives from Wythenshawe Action Zone resulting in 18 successful applicants |
| May | ■ Successful students visit offices of RBS for taster sessions |
| June | ■ Launch of YA programme  
■ Two-day induction programme in school |
| July | ■ Further taster sessions take place at RBS offices with students meeting their trained mentors; other students to meet mentors over the summer holiday |
| September | ■ Students commence YA programme |
Case study 15. **Tasters and selection for vocational programmes**

In the South Lakes area of Cumbria it was thought that the Increased Flexibility Programme at Kendal College was not attracting the students who would most benefit from the courses on offer. These included: Motor Vehicle; Hair and Beauty; Construction; Health and Social Care. These courses are delivered one day a week over Years 10 and 11. Out of the first phase 14–19 Pathfinder project on personalised learning grew the idea that some form of pre-testing should take place while the Year 9 students visited their local college on a ‘taster day’ in February. The students chose two vocational areas to sample while at the college, but at the outset they were tested on their vocational aptitude for the areas they had chosen. The testing process consisted of a personal presentation, practical activities and written responses to questions connected to the vocational areas the young people had chosen. The testing process also allowed for observation of the students to take place. The results of the tests, together with observation records, helped the coordinators to select the students they considered would benefit most. Out of 100 students involved in this year’s taster day it is expected that half will be offered places on the courses. This testing process was carried out on last year’s Young Apprenticeship cohort and no student had yet dropped out of the programme.

(Source: Robin Webster)

What preparation of students should be planned?

As with other educational experiences, it is preferable to arrange some preparation so that students get the most out of the experience. In some cases the taster might form part of a progression of experiences designed to ease their transition between the phases of 14–21 education, training and work. The involvement of the Connexions Service is important. However, in many areas Connexions work with ‘at risk’ students in Years 9, 10 and 11 and other students may not be receiving any individual careers counselling. The school’s IAG programme is therefore critical. Preparation for vocational choices can begin as early as Year 8 in careers and personal, social and health education (PSHE) lessons. Such preparation should include lessons on equal opportunities, the pay gap and countering sex and ethnic stereotyping in vocational choices.
How should equal opportunities be addressed?

Without positive intervention young people still tend to select vocational courses on stereotypical lines. Young people need IAG at an early age about opportunities, barriers and the advantages and disadvantages of taking particular courses in non-stereotypical vocational areas. They need positive role models to help and support them when they make their choices. Industrial visits, hosted by positive role models, can often enthuse students. Vocational choices 14–19 should be accessible to all students including gifted and talented, special needs students and, where ethnic minorities are under-represented, provision should be made to target and offer additional support and IAG.

It is important that schools and partners arranging vocational tasters consider the current gender and ethnic balance in vocational choices. It is common for some vocational courses to be associated with a particular gender. Vocational tasters as an initial experience of a vocational area can have a critical impact in reinforcing or challenging these stereotypes. For example, if female students visit a college workshop which has all-male lecturers and students this will tend to reinforce the message that engineering is not for girls. So, serious attention needs to be given to the use of non-stereotypical role models. There may also be a case for single-sex tasters groups, which can address the concerns of girls or boys in a supportive environment.

What legal issues need to be considered?

Vocational tasters can be regarded as a form of visit, so guidance from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) on the organisation of visits should be followed. It is important that the college or other provider receiving school students should carry out a risk assessment and communicate this to the school. This might involve a modified version of the risk assessment for the Increased Flexibility Programme. To fulfil its duty of care, the school should make sure a suitably experienced member of staff visits the place where the taster is to be held to discuss other health and safety issues in the light of their knowledge of the children. For example, issues can arise when students from rival schools are mixed in the same groups. It is also very important that in any partnership activity there is a lead partner for the purposes of insurance. In the case of vocational tasters this would generally be the organisation offering the taster experience. Other issues that can arise include child protection, but these would be the same as for the Increased Flexibility Programme. Further guidance on the legal considerations involved in vocational programmes has been published by the DfES in Work-related learning and the law (2004).
What evaluation should be conducted?

Schools and their partners should identify some key questions to ask students participating in vocational tasters, for example:

- Why did you choose this taster?
- Do you feel better informed about the vocational area and career opportunities?
- Did the experience confirm your interest in taking this vocational course?
- Did the experience put you off taking this vocational course?
- What things put you off? What things encouraged you?
- How could the taster programme be improved?

The evaluation should also consider the gender and ethnic composition of taster groups and how literature and other communications give out stereotyped messages. The views of parents, teachers and providers can also be sought on the effectiveness of the taster programme.
References


14–19: Programme of Support for Delivery of Change on the Ground