

## Case study: Cornwall College

### Key features of employer-responsive provision demonstrated by this case study

#### Employer-focused mission and strategy

- 1 We explicitly recognise the importance of employer responsiveness throughout our organisation.
- 2 Our training portfolio is driven by employer and labour market needs.

#### Marketing and infrastructure

- 4 We are aware of the business needs of employers and are committed to fulfilling them.
- 5 We provide employers with consistent, named contacts who understand their business.
- 6 We have appropriate and dependable administrative systems for employer-facing work.
- 7 We record all interactions with employers and use this information for planning and marketing.
- 8 We provide high-quality organisational and training needs analysis services.
- 9 We enable employers to secure appropriate training at a reasonable cost.

#### Flexible and relevant delivery

- 10 We are able to provide training promptly in response to identified needs.
- 11 We provide training in a way that minimises disturbance to the employer's business and is delivered flexibly.
- 13 Our trainers and assessors are experts and interact effectively with employers and their workforce.

#### Networks and partnerships

- 18 We are part of local training networks and partnerships aiming to improve the service to employers.
- 19 We support networks of local employers to improve their access to training.

#### Support for business development

- 20 We support employers' wider activities, such as using expertise or facilities for product development, or encourage them to use similar support from other sources.

**The complete list of key features of employer-responsive provision and related case studies can be found at <http://excellence.qia.org.uk/skills-and-demand-led>**

## Introduction

Cornwall College is a large further education (FE) college with major sites across the county. It has substantial employer-facing provision co-ordinated across the college by a dedicated unit – Cornwall College Business (CCB), which services 14 business sectors.

The importance of employer engagement across the whole college is recognised in the college's strategic plan. There are about 1200 apprentices across the sectors; Train to Gain attracted 500 learners in its first year and employer-facing work generates about £8m annually. The college has four Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs), which provide particularly high-quality learning environments.

## Reliable contacts between provider and employer

Contact with customers at Cornwall College has been streamlined and is led by specialist liaison officers for apprenticeship work and business development advisers (BDAs) for all other employer-facing activities. The BDAs are linked with specific sectors and college departments to focus their work and help develop expertise but they are able to source training from any college department or from the team of specialist trainers in Cornwall College Business. All contacts are logged centrally so that before visiting a client college staff can call on a record of previous contacts and identify any outstanding issues.

For larger employers the college seeks to establish a joint steering group that brings together the key contacts from across the college and their counterparts across the company. For example, the college has developed such an arrangement with Imerys – a large mining and manufacturing company that employs workers at sites across Cornwall, as well as elsewhere in the UK and abroad. The college supports the company in many ways: it provides a large part of their apprenticeship programme; basic skills training for operatives and NVQ programmes for managers. It offers a mix of 'off-the-shelf' packages and bespoke work to meet the needs identified by local managers. The steering group meets monthly, chaired by the HR manager from Imerys, and produces action notes that are circulated to all concerned.

The steering group has been the single most important step in bringing in a co-ordinated approach to meeting our needs as a client. It replaced a system of enthusiastic but random marketing which did not help the college or the company.

Nik Green, Learning and Development Specialist, Imerys

Where a steering group is not appropriate the college has introduced a system of key account managers related to individual client employers. The move has been welcomed; particularly by employers who deal with several different departments at the college.

At last the college has developed a streamlined approach to its dealings with us. One of the failings in the past is that we were bombarded by contacts from too many people.

Vicky Crossingham, HR Director, St Austell Brewery

In addition to key account managers, the college has introduced a dedicated phone number and sales team, and a specialist website for employers, to make it easier for them to find what they need. Although it is in its early days, around 50% of new business is believed to come through the website.

Why have these changes come about? Primarily because the college listened to its customers and they asked for a simplified system of contacts.

I am afraid that I was quite vocal about this. We are used to dealing with dedicated account managers in other business-to-business activity, and we are pleased that the college has now responded.

Nik Green, Learning and Development Specialist, Imerys

Both college and employers benefit from this way of working. Staff at Cornwall College Business believe it gives them 'a permanent foot in the door'. If a new requirement for training comes up they are already there.

## A good quality TNA service can be critical

In its relations with employers, Cornwall College Business starts from the principle that its role is to help businesses improve their performance, not to sell training. This means that conversations frequently start from a training needs analysis (TNA), usually conducted by one of the team of BDAs. In more technical areas the BDA will bring in a specialist from one of the college departments who is better placed to identify the skills required.

The TNA service is valued by customers; they look to the college to provide advice about training needs and the most cost-effective way to meet them. For example, the Teddington Group, which makes control devices for appliances and has a major manufacturing operation in St Austell, approached the college to help them cope with difficulties that were threatening their expansion plans. The college identified that NVQs in Customer Service and Manufacturing Operations, delivered in the workplace, would help meet their needs – and further identified that funding to reduce the cost was available through Train to Gain.

Working with Cornwall College Business has helped us to pinpoint the correct training for our business ... we are all delighted.

Personnel Manager, Teddington Group

TNA may identify training needs that are not met by existing programmes and the college then provides bespoke programmes to meet that need.

The college diagnosed and designed a bespoke offer, adapting a technical certificate from one programme and an NVQ from elsewhere. They really delivered.

Nik Green, Learning and Development Specialist, Imerys

The college emphasises that all conversations with employers start from an assessment of their needs.

We are not looking to sell courses, we are looking to help improve business performance; but once we are clear what they need we can offer them a menu with a sliding scale of charges – the more it is customised the more expensive and vice versa. We like to talk about the value of training first then we talk about how we can get to the price the client needs.

Tamsyn Harris, Head of Business Development, Cornwall College

## Accessing external funding to meet customer needs

Cornwall College sees a key part of its role as working with local businesses and sector groups to ensure that both project funding and core grant can be accessed to meet customer needs. This has been particularly relevant in Cornwall as it is one of the few places in England where European Social Fund (ESF) Objective 1 funds have been available.

Local employers clearly see help with guiding them through the complexities of funding as an important part of the service.

The college works closely with the Brewery's own training centre. Rather than seeing the training centre as competition the college has helped the firm find ways to fund it.

Vicky Crassingham, HR Director, St Austell Brewery

Nik Green from Imerys also values the help of the college in reducing the costs of training. This large company has no special expertise in relation to the regulations surrounding government and EU funding. For example, the company needs to train 800 employees to achieve their NVQ in process operations by 2010. By accessing funding via Train to Gain (and the Employer Training Pilots that preceded it) the college managed to reduce the overall cost to the company from £500 per employee to £100.

The ability to access external funding was the deciding factor in giving the work to the college.

Nik Green, Learning and Development Specialist, Imerys

Another example involved the delivery of NVQs in-house to some 120 managers. The college recruited a specialist member of staff to deliver the work and managed to reduce the cost per head from £3500 to £1500 through its knowledge of funding sources. The college and the company are both clear that saving money by accessing external funding means that there are more resources for other training.

A training manager's budget is often limited, but the need for training is open-ended. If you can save a firm money on one part of its operations you will often find that they commission more work from you somewhere else.

Andy Peters, Business Development Manager, Cornwall College

## Training that minimises disturbance to the employer's business

Cornwall College delivers training in ways that best meet the needs of employers' business operations. Programmes are offered through distance learning, in-plant training and assessment, individual coaching or customised group programmes. The college is equally flexible in the timing of delivery, running programmes to fit with shift patterns, at weekends or even at night.

It was not always the case. Nik Green from Imerys recalls a time when phones would go unanswered in the summer holidays and the college seemed to revolve around the timetable of the academic year: this has now changed. As an example he quotes work on literacy and numeracy that has been a priority of the Union Learning Representatives across the company. Programmes have been delivered in the workplace to some 60 people. It has involved out-of-hours delivery, in some cases on the night shift. College staff have also delivered training at the company's sites in Yorkshire.

There are no problems about delivering at times that suit our shift patterns. They haven't had to do any assessments at weekends but I am certain that they would do that as well if I asked.

Nik Green, Learning and Development Specialist, Imerys

The college suggests that flexibility has at least partly been achieved by having a dedicated delivery team for in-plant delivery within Cornwall College Business that can respond to employer demand. The team are not fully committed to other programmes, which provides the space to respond flexibly as required. The team are recruited from industry and expect to work in this way. Their example is crucial to bringing about wider cultural change across the college.

## It's not just training...

Cornwall College is proud of the range of services it offers to employers; not just training courses but research, consultancy and technical support.

At Duchy College, the specialist land-based centre, which is an integral part of the college but operates with considerable autonomy, these services are a particularly important feature of the provision. The Rural Business School at Duchy accesses funding from a range of sources to support project work relevant to the sector. A typical example is the Rural Tourism Benchmarking Project. Data is collected confidentially by the Business School and then analysed so that the performance of any business can be compared against its peers. The analysis of differences is a springboard for further discussions of how differences in performance can be achieved and how individual businesses can improve. It is a service in its own right but can also open the door to further work.

The most ambitious aspect of this wider business agenda is the opening of a £4.7m Food Innovation Centre, funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the European Union. The aim of the centre is to demonstrate food-processing operations and allow local businesses to access the facilities so that they can experiment with possible new products. The college sees the centre as one way in which it can be at the hub of the food renaissance in the region, providing training both in adding value to local produce and in running successful food-related businesses. The centre also acts as a showcase for local businesses.

[I am looking forward to working with the college and using the facilities it can provide for new product development.](#)

[Andy Atkinson, Cornish Orchards](#)

## Key messages for improvement

- Placing an emphasis on employer engagement across the whole college provides a strong message about its centrality to the purpose of the organisation.
- Listening to customers is the best way to find out what they require and what needs to change to fulfil their needs.
- The service to employers should start from the perspective of the needs of the business, not selling training.
- The scale of the work with employers determines the approach to organising this provision. Where the volume of activity is great it is crucially important to coordinate this carefully. This calls for a range of new posts with clear remits and lines of communication to other aspects of the service.
- The size of the company also needs to be taken into account. Large employers may generate business across a wide spectrum of activity, so coordination and consistency need to be carefully managed. A steering group, or management group, may be a good solution to this issue. However, a more personal approach may be the best way of managing relationships with a small company.
- In all circumstances, contacts with employers need to be logged and the information examined frequently to identify trends and issues. This information needs to be considered in relation to progress towards the aims of the provider's strategic and business plan.
- Good organisational and training needs analysis processes enable the match between what the provider offers and the employer wants to be determined. If this match is not apparent, providers should either offer a bespoke programme or direct the employer to another provider who can meet their needs.



- Employers need to know the true costs of the service they are offered by providers but may still require project funding or grants to get the training they need. Providers need to work with employers and other agencies to source such support.
- Providers are able to offer services other than training. There is untapped capacity for providing research and development support that would capitalise on the providers' expertise to help employers develop their products and services.

## Alternative approaches

Other providers have experienced similar issues. **Shipley College**, for example, considers it critical to work with committed employers and learners to bring about improved success rates in apprenticeship programmes.

Shipley College has CoVE Status in Retail and Customer Service and is also accredited to the Matrix Standard and Investors in People Award. Its retention and achievement rates and the success of learners are among the best in the region.

Shipley suggests the following steps to ensure effective employer engagement:

- a consultative approach to establishing employers' needs
- gathering market intelligence to inform planning, marketing and recruitment
- establishing a sound and compelling business case for vocational training and the most appropriate programme for the learner and employer
- providing ongoing 'account management' as an effective way of meeting the needs of the employer and growing business for the provider
- developing and using a 'benefits'-based approach to employer engagement
- gathering performance feedback from employers that identifies improvements
- securing employers' contribution to the delivery of programmes through steering groups and similar activities
- team participation in a consultative approach to employer engagement
- building trust and relationships with the employer and learner.

See also **Preston College** case study at <http://excellence.qia.org.uk/skills-and-demand-led>, which demonstrates a similar range of features of employer responsive provision. Further case studies on employer responsiveness are also available on [www.qiaemployerled.org.uk](http://www.qiaemployerled.org.uk)