

A shared responsibility

Partnership working between employers, providers and other agencies is an important factor in the development of world-class skills.

- **Employers**, both individually and through representative bodies, such as the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors, create the demand for learning and skills and use the capacity of their workforce. Employers are being encouraged to sign the Skills Pledge, a voluntary, public commitment to support all employees to develop their skills.
- The **Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills** works with partners from the commercial, public and voluntary sectors to:
 - improve the skills of the population throughout their working lives
 - accelerate the commercial exploitation of creativity and knowledge, through innovation and research
 - pursue global excellence in research and knowledge
 - strengthen the further and higher education systems and institutions to better support national economic and social needs.
- The **Learning and Skills Council** (LSC) works to make England better skilled and more competitive: 'We have a single goal: to improve the skills of England's young people and adults to ensure we have a workforce of world-class standard'. LSC's Train to Gain service is dedicated to enabling employers to get the skills they need to be successful.
- The **Skills for Business** network is made up of 25 Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) – employer-led, independent organisations. They are involved in ensuring that qualifications and learning programmes are more effective in developing the skills that employers want and that learners need to secure and maintain employment. The SSCs are developing Sector Skills Agreements that map how these skills will be supplied.
- From April 2008 the **UK Commission for Employment and Skills** will promote increased investment in workforce skills by employers for a more highly skilled and productive economy.
- **Colleges, work-based training and other providers** are critically important in delivering skills and developing their relationships with employers. Providers need to prove by their responsiveness that they can improve the performance of business.
- **QIA** has supported a programme to help providers improve their services to employers. A major new programme to support responsiveness starts in May 2008.

Performance to date

QIA research into effective practice in employer engagement suggests that many providers have been successful in:

- raising the profile and extent of employer-facing work in their institutions
 - providing training matched to the business needs of the employer
 - providing reliable communication channels with employers backed by appropriate customer relationship management systems
 - helping employers attain public subsidy for training
 - delivering training flexibly minimising disturbance to the employer's business.
- They still have some way to go in:
- drawing their non-apprenticeship employer-facing work into a rigorous quality assurance system
 - developing ways to adequately meet the training requirements of small and medium-sized enterprises
 - supporting employers through services other than training, for example assistance with product development
 - expanding capacity to meet government ambitions.

Further support

QIA has been conducting a wide range of research into employer responsiveness that has resulted in several outcomes, including:

- case studies that describe effective practice and the journey towards it in relation to the key features of provision described in this leaflet
- full and summary reports of research findings on the Excellence Gateway
- new materials and information regularly added to www.qiaemployerled.org.uk and the Excellence Gateway.

Join the debate

QIA and its successor organisation will continue to support providers in developing their responsiveness to employers. Sharing emerging practice is a key part of this. Please complete the form at <http://excellence.qia.org.uk/skills-and-demand-led> or email liz.aitken@qia.org.uk with brief details of examples you think might be of interest to other providers.



Supporting good practice in employer responsiveness: a guide to quality improvement

The Leitch report on prosperity in the global economy signalled the urgent need to develop a workforce with world-class skills. The scale of this challenge is formidable and will mean a doubling of current efforts.

Based on QIA research and experience from the Development Programme for Train to Gain, this leaflet describes key features of employer-responsive provision and how they might be put into practice. QIA's websites provide a wide range of practical resources and more detailed case studies supplement this leaflet.

Achieving responsiveness

- Improving employer responsiveness involves:
- explicitly including employer-facing work in strategic and financial planning
 - locating the responsibility for it at a senior level
 - having coordinated and effective systems to record, promote and deliver such provision
 - using the expertise of those successfully engaging with employers to improve employer responsiveness in other areas.
- Even colleges with substantial full-time 16–19 provision should consider whether they place sufficient emphasis on skills for employability and awareness of the world of work and engage employers as strategic partners and stakeholders.
- The Training Quality Standard (formerly known as the New Standard) provides accreditation for the responsiveness of organisations involved in training and development for employers. It was developed by the Centre for Enterprise, with the support of the Learning and Skills Council. QIA has been providing support for providers involved in the Training Quality Standard through the Whole Organisation Consultancy strand of the Development Programme for Train to Gain. Part of that support is a Framework to Measure and Improve Employer Responsiveness that provides a useful guide for providers wishing to become more responsive to employers' needs.

Key features of employer-responsive provision

Providers that routinely meet the needs of employers should be able to agree with the following statements.

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.

3 We have detailed knowledge of national, regional and local skills needs and likely business developments.

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.

12 We ensure that all trainees get initial assessment and guidance to ensure they and their employers get maximum benefits from their training and are supported to progress further.

13 Our trainers and assessors are experts and interact effectively with employers and their workforce.

14 We ensure that we use high-quality, appropriate training resources.

Quality improvement

15 We help employers to identify the likely impact of training and development on their business and to measure the impact in the short and long term.

16 We evaluate all our training and have rigorous quality assurance arrangements to continually improve the service.

17 We share information and good practice with our colleagues to enable everyone to improve.

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.

Key features: some examples

Employer-focused mission and strategy

Hereford Group Training Association (HGTA) is employer-owned – accountable to and informed by its customers with whom it builds relationships to identify both immediate and long-term needs and its strategic plan fully reflects this ethos.

The companies on the Board are very good at articulating the needs of their sector, and we consult with other organisations too. We want to make sure that all employers who work with us discuss the plan and priorities for training.
Philip Round,
Chief Executive, HGTA

Marketing and infrastructure

During preliminary sales meetings with employers, Goldsmith Management Centre (GMC) conducts an organisational needs analysis to supplement the employer's views on their training needs. Outcomes from the discussions include the measurable impact of the training on the organisation and the evaluation parameters. All the information is recorded on the GMC database.

Recent outcomes include an 18-month leadership programme for junior managers, and a 'learning at work' week of bite-sized chunks of learning on a range of technical subjects.
Jerry Grafton, Altro Group

Flexible and relevant delivery

Protocol Skills has a good relationship with local firms.

[The Protocol assessor] is really good. She'll come in once a week and look at the rotas and work around it so she can spend an hour off the shop floor with the trainees as well as observing them [at work]. She looks at their files and makes sure they know what they are doing.

Sales Manager, New Look

Flexible assessment

Ludlow College purchased equipment to record the outcomes of NVQ review visits and assessments electronically. Employers and trainees appreciate the flexibility of the system. The college has also supplied the equipment to some larger employers with their own work-based assessors so that they too benefit from these advantages. In four larger care homes where there are qualified work-based assessors, the Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) has provided assessors with the PaperFree system of managing assessments and free training in its use.

Quality improvement

Preston College considers it critical that staff on employer-facing work have relevant knowledge and skills. The retail CoVE staff are regularly consulted at a national level and all staff delivering training in business improvement techniques have a background in the relevant sector.

We recruit staff with recent strong industrial experience and we have a staff development programme that provides placements for those who have been out of industry for some time. We are very careful about who we ask to take on work with employers.
Janet Rogers, Assistant Director, Preston College

Networks and partnerships

The CoVE at Ludlow College has a steering group that includes employers and a formal employer group with representatives from across the county. It also set up a provider consortium with membership drawn from a similarly broad range of providers. The Sector Skills Council created a sub-regional group – the Care Workforce Development Partnership (CWDP) – and the CoVE and CWDP work very closely and successfully together.

Working together brings about more effective and more efficient training delivery. These partnerships have been extra-ordinarily successful in attracting funding for training and project support. I have never known partnership working as good as here, or with such good results... The CoVE is a very important partner.
Mike Donkin, CWDP chair

Support for business development

Cornwall College offers services to employers including research, consultancy and technical support as well as training. The Rural Tourism Benchmarking Project, for example, collects and analyses data to enable the performance of any business to be compared (confidentially) against its peers. It is a service in its own right but can also lead to further work, such as the £4.7 million Food Innovation Centre, funded by DEFRA and the EU.

This enables the college to 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.
I am looking forward to working with the college and using the facilities it can provide for new product development.
Andy Atkinson,
Cornish Orchards