

Case study: Lincoln 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

- 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.

Flexible and relevant delivery

- 10 We are able to provide training promptly in response to identified needs.
- 13 Our trainers and assessors are experts and interact effectively with employers and their workforce.

Quality improvement

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

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

Lincoln College is a general further education (FE) college consisting of Lincoln, Gainsborough and Newark colleges (a recent merger and based in Nottinghamshire). It is the lead provider for a Train to Gain contract operating in Lincolnshire, Rutland, Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire and Derbyshire. Lincoln College is the largest training provider for apprenticeships in Lincolnshire and Rutland.

The college has a business development centre that manages the consortia and contracts, and recruits employers on behalf of Lincoln College direct delivery. The training for employers is delivered from within the academic schools. A customer satisfaction survey of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) conducted in November 2006 revealed high satisfaction with the quality of training but also identified issues concerning responsiveness and communications with employers. At about the same time the college took part in an Improvement Project as part of the QIA Development Programme for Train to Gain. This involved reviewing their current practice in customer care against criteria for good practice.

The key findings from the review are outlined below.

- Most employers agreed that the college was a business-friendly, responsive, customer-focused organisation. Nearly all the employers saw themselves as customers of the college training services, rather than as partners in training, but they were all happy with this relationship.
- Personal relationships were important to employers rather than dealing with anonymous people. Employers already had strong relationships with cross-college personnel including tutors, learning brokers and training co-ordinators – all of whom were taking responsibility for responsiveness and ownership of issues.
- Most employers would have liked a key account manager as long as they were knowledgeable and responsive. There was a non-organised 'organically grown' set of 'account managers' who had personal relationships with employers and took responsibility for customer care and support.
- Employers using the website to make initial enquiries did not develop any personal contacts with the college.
- There was little information on what involvement employers had across different parts of the college, which highlighted strongly the need for sharing data.
- Although learner feedback was good, employers were not receiving feedback or initial information about their employees' courses from the college. This appeared to be more important in larger organisations (25+ employees).
- College staff working with employers appeared to understand the employers' business needs where the employers themselves saw this as important and were willing to share the information.
- Most of the employers agreed that the college offered flexible training that took into account their working patterns.
- Few employers could remember receiving information from the college on training available from the college.
- There were mixed views on the administration of signing up employees on college courses.

Improving effective communications with employers

The college decided to improve their communications with employers by:

- implementing a customer relationship management (CRM) system across the college and integrating it into the college management information system (MIS)
- retaining and formalising key account management for employers
- developing a communications strategy for working with employers
- looking at developing and implementing an employer charter in the future.

The CRM system was viewed as pivotal for the success of sharing data and effectively managing the interaction with employers, so an action plan was developed to put this in place. This involved the following:

- scoping what is meant by being responsive
- defining entry points for customer enquiry
- tracking and charting current information flows
- collating information on current data held and used for tracking across college
- defining 'ideal solutions', processes and procedures in relation to what is currently in use, Training Quality Standard (TQS, formerly the New Standard) and EMSkills standards
- identifying the most appropriate CRM system to meet the cross-college ideal
- purchasing and installing it
- writing guidelines on using the CRM system
- training on guidelines and the CRM system during the college staff development week.

The project was led by the employer engagement manager and the senior management team were involved in a supportive, advisory and monitoring role through the direct input of the vice-principal of planning and funding. There was significant input from all members of the college who were consulted and made suggestions. A cross-college pilot group was formed from different academic schools, the business development centre, quality and marketing, and was involved in the selection and piloting of the CRM.

Members of the college management team (CMT) were also involved in scoping the project through interview and discussion. The priorities identified from the audit have also fed into the TQS working group, which has representation from all areas of the college. Lessons learnt from the review fed directly into a cross-college audit against the TQS indicators.

Reinforcing employer engagement as a key strategic objective

The senior management and governors set up an awayday where employers were invited to discuss their views on the progress of the college in responding to their needs.

Mapping processes and procedures used for work-based learning (apprenticeships) and Train to Gain required a high degree of collaboration and discussion, resulting in a high level of standardisation, and team-working. This was an extremely useful exercise and furthered understanding of the range of job roles within the employer-engagement process, which had not previously been defined.

The initial intention to train all staff in using the CRM during staff development week was scaled down after feedback from the pilot group. The CRM will necessitate a different working ethos, and if used to its maximum is quite complex, so it was decided in the interests of maintaining reliable data, only to give those in the pilot group (and therefore 'champions') direct access in the short term. All other data will be gathered through a simple web applet (or paper-based form), which will be input by a dedicated CRM administrator.

As a consequence of the strong leadership from the senior management team and the desire of the college management team to meet the TQS, more development has taken place, including:

- new posts to support the employer engagement agenda – an employer engagement manager, three business advisers (for key account function responding to employers), an employee response co-ordinator (responding to employees' needs) and a telesales/CRM administrator
- reorganisation encouraging the various funding streams supporting employer engagement (work-based learning, Train In Work, Train To Gain, core funding, full-cost work) to work collaboratively as a team rather than in silos
- improved cross-college communications through the TQS working group, employer engagement/marketing groups; work-based learning forums
- an employer charter drafted and underpinning employer enquiry standards defined
- a cross-college customer care policy
- an employer telephone hotline (local number) has been ordered, an email address for employers and an employer brochure drafted
- training on the charter, standards and processes interwoven with the CRM training as it is rolled out across the college.

Key messages for improvement

- A systematic review of provision can help to identify what is working well and what needs to improve. It is crucially important to ensure that this involves key stakeholders – both internal and external to the college – and employers.
- CRM processes should do more than collect data: they need to be an integral part of the organisation's strategic intelligence and produce information that provides a useful indicator of progress towards strategic objectives. CRM systems can assist this process, but must be accompanied by clear and appropriate procedures that staff understand and value.
- Personal relationships are central to good customer relationships. They need to be systematically nurtured and extended.

Alternative approaches

Other providers have experienced similar issues.

TBG Learning is a not-for-profit national training provider delivering Train to Gain and work-based learning through its employer division across the Midlands, Essex, London and Kent. Each area is a delivery partner in a Train to Gain consortium.

The TBG Learning portfolio offers delivery across all sectors with cross-sector qualifications such as business administration, customer service, ITQ and team leading. In addition, all regions offer logistics qualifications.

TBG identified the need for employer-facing staff to possess the tools required to effectively interact with employers as a priority for improvement. To address this, they developed a sales toolkit and trained their staff in its use.

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