

Improving employer responsiveness

Policy, consultation and research: the key messages

Research

LSIS
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AND SKILLS
IMPROVEMENT
SERVICE

The logo graphic for LSIS consists of several overlapping, flowing, ribbon-like shapes in shades of orange and red, curving upwards and to the right, positioned to the right of the text.

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Developing
an employer-focused
mission
and strategy

2 **Publisher**

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1

Developing an employer-focused mission and strategy

Introduction

This pamphlet extracts the key messages for improving employer responsiveness emerging from a review of policy and QIA/LSIS* research, development and consultation activities relating to the design and adoption of an employer-focused mission and strategy. It is one of a series of six pamphlets that consider how the further education (FE) system can develop employer-responsive provision. The others are as follows.

- 2 Marketing and infrastructure to support employer engagement
- 3 Flexible and relevant delivery for employer-facing provision
- 4 Quality improvement for employer responsiveness
- 5 Networks and partnerships for employer responsiveness
- 6 FE support for business development

The QIA/LSIS review looked at 30 reports, considering the implications for quality improvement emerging from research and development activities commissioned by QIA on FE providers' responsiveness to employers' needs since the establishment of QIA in April 2006.

It also considered the related policy context on employer engagement. The full review is available from www.excellencegateway.org.uk/research

Each pamphlet considers issues emerging from a range of material relating to employer responsiveness.

Policy development

Government White Papers and independent reviews that have contributed to policy development in relation to employer responsiveness.

Consultation and feedback

Outcomes of consultation studies and events that provide insights into issues and concerns relating to the employer responsiveness of providers and other stakeholders.*

Research and development

Outcomes from QIA/LSIS studies on employer responsiveness.

The pamphlets also provide short case studies and advice on what providers should do to improve their employer responsiveness.

Key features of employer-responsive provision

The former QIA (now LSIS) identified the key features of responsive provision in *Supporting good practice in employer responsiveness: a guide to quality improvement* (April 2008). See pages 18 and 19 for a mapping of the review items to these key features.*

Features of an employer-focused mission and strategy

An employer-focused mission and strategy is the essential prerequisite for an employer-responsive FE service. QIA identified the key features as follows:

- 4
- the importance of employer responsiveness is explicitly recognised throughout the provider's organisation;
 - the provider's training portfolio is driven by employer and labour market needs;
 - the provider has detailed knowledge of national, regional and local skills needs and likely business developments.

The review of policy, research and development revealed a substantial amount of advice on what constitutes an employer-focused mission and strategy, issues for improvement and examples of action that should be taken to achieve it, as outlined in the sections that follow.

*

The numbers in orange boxes on pages 18 and 19 refer to items included in the review. They are consistent with the numbers in orange boxes elsewhere in this pamphlet.

Policy development

Focus on skills and employability

The 2005 Foster Review of FE **1** concluded that colleges should focus on skills and employability. They should look at what more they need to do to improve their offer to employers both through their primary role in improving the pool of employability and skills and in response to specific employer needs. Colleges should work with the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to develop a new national standard in the design and delivery of workforce development service to employers.*

The right skills for work

The 2005 White Paper *Skills: getting on in business, getting on at work* **2** proposed that more people should have the right skills and qualifications to be effective and productive at work. It set out government plans to improve training provision and skills in the UK through the reform of education and training for both young people and adults to meet employers' needs. Publicly funded skills training should be led by the needs of employers and employers should have a much stronger voice in identifying national, sectoral and regional skills priorities, and in shaping the framework for the supply of training to meet them. The main mechanisms proposed to facilitate this were:

- the network of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs);
- developing Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs);
- Regional Skills Partnerships that should integrate employers' skills and business support needs into regional economic development plans.

Vocational learning for young people

The 2005 White Paper *14–19 education and skills* **3** addressed the government's aim of equipping young people and adults with the skills needed to be employable and achieve success in life and offering employers the opportunity to contribute to the long-term transformation of vocational education in support of a successful economy. It noted the absence of good vocational options for learners throughout the 14–19 phase and announced measures to support schools with limited experience of offering vocational options and colleges largely catering for over-16s.

1

Realising the potential: a review of the future of further education colleges

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The Training Quality Standard has been introduced since the publication of the Foster Review.

2

Skills: getting on in business, getting on at work

3

14–19 education and skills

FE as the powerhouse for skills development

The 2006 White Paper *Further education: raising skills, improving life chances* **4** set out a programme of change for the FE system intended to develop its potential as the ‘powerhouse of a high skills economy’ and to deliver the government’s skills agenda. The broad basis of reforms set out was to ensure that publicly funded training and training providers are more directly responsive to employers’ needs. It proposed a clear mission focused on helping people gain the skills and qualifications needed for employability, with learners and employers determining what provision is funded and how services are delivered.

4

Further education: raising skills, improving life chances

6

Investing in skills for economic competitiveness

The 2006 Leitch Review of Skills **5** concluded that the UK must urgently raise achievements at all skills levels and recommended that it commit to becoming a world leader in skills by 2020. It emphasised developing economically valuable skills and encouraging employers to take more responsibility for skills development, including paying for training. It also proposed the creation of a Commission for Employment and Skills ***** to strengthen employers’ voices in policy development and that vocational skills must be demand-led rather than centrally planned.

5

Prosperity for all in the global economy: world-class skills

The Commission for Employment and Skills was established in April 2008.

Skills for sustainable employment

The 2007 White Paper *Opportunity, employment and progression: making skills work* **6** proposed an emphasis on skills as the key to sustainable employment, with a focus on retention and progression – not just job entry. The goal is a seamless journey from benefits into work, in-work training and career progression. The White Paper aimed to ensure that the supply of training is high quality, responsive, driven by the needs of employers and leads to the development of skills for sustainable employment.

6

Opportunity, employment and progression: making skills work

9

The race to the top: a review of government's science and innovation policies

FE and business innovation

The 2008 Sainsbury Review *The race to the top: a review of the government's science and innovation policies* 9 considered the role of science and innovation in enabling the country to compete against low-wage, emerging economies such as China and India. It reiterated the government's view that in an era of globalisation the UK needs to move into high-value goods, services and industries. An effective science and innovation system is seen to be vital to achieve this objective.

The Review saw considerable scope for FE colleges to help raise the innovation performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It recommended that Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTP) are extended to FE colleges – providing skills training to employers is also a knowledge transfer activity and is core to the mission of FE colleges. The Review also asserted that FE colleges possessing knowledge transfer experience beyond mainstream provision will be better equipped to meet businesses' skills requirements and more likely to be seen by businesses as providers of relevant skills. By engaging in knowledge transfer, FE colleges will continue to establish themselves with business as an extra source of solutions to business problems.

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Innovation nation

Infrastructure for business innovation

The 2008 White Paper *Innovation nation* 10 proposed that innovation is essential to the UK's future economic prosperity and quality of life to raise productivity, foster competitive businesses, meet the challenges of globalisation and live within environmental and demographic limits. It proposed:

- implementing the Leitch Review of Skills to raise skill levels and enhance opportunities for innovation by building implementation of the Sainsbury Review recommendations into its wider strategies for FE reform;
- establishing a revenue-based FE Specialisation and Innovation Fund to build the capacity of the FE sector to support businesses to raise their innovation potential (a few targeted pathfinder projects to drive business innovation through partnership and knowledge exchange will be supported from autumn 2008);
- establishing at least one National Skills Academy in every major sector of the economy as well as the planned National Enterprise Academy and the Dyson School for Design Innovation;
- expanding the Train to Gain and Apprenticeship programmes.

Consultation and feedback

Implementing Leitch

Participants at ‘The Leitch Review of Skills – seizing the agenda’ 2007 policy seminar series held by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) ¹⁴ generally welcomed the vision of the Leitch Review, particularly:

- the profile and importance the proposals give to the role of the FE sector in supporting the UK’s competitiveness;
- the intention that providers will operate on a business-to-business basis with employers and with individuals, subject to less planning intervention and fewer intermediaries, and with incentives to be responsive;
- the promise of greater integration of skills and employment around a shared objective of sustained employment and career progression.

They also discussed factors that could hinder the implementation of Leitch including the following.

- The government continues to set priorities for skills development, despite the rhetoric that the market does this. Specific targets set by the LSC are at odds with employers and learners shaping skills provision through demand. Prescriptions on the use of government funding and what can be subsidised further complicate the system.
- A demand-led system will only operate if there is effective demand.
- Public subsidy, funding incentives and quality measures are orientated towards whole qualifications, which may not be what employers and employees want. Providers that meet employers’ or individuals’ needs may jeopardise their organisational performance measures. Employers requiring customised provision must forego public subsidy or be persuaded that they want a product eligible for subsidy.
- These constraints distort the market and discourage the system from delivering the outcomes needed by the economy or by individuals.

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The Leitch Review of Skills – seizing the agenda: a report of the CEL policy seminar series held April–July 2007

15

Consultation on a programme to meet the challenges of 'World Class Skills – implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England'

Scale of the change in FE

QIA's 2007 consultation on a programme to meet the challenges of implementing the Leitch Review of Skills 15 concluded that:

- the scale of change required in how colleges in particular operate is huge, requiring wholesale culture shift and reengineering of products and services;
- the FE workforce needs a wider range of skills other than teaching and learning;
- new business models are needed to underpin employer-led providers, with major changes to staffing, pay and conditions of service;
- changes in the funding of adult learning will have far-reaching implications for providers and how their core business operates.

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Success factors for employer responsiveness

Key messages emerging from QIA's Development Programme for Train to Gain were discussed at a series of national dissemination conferences 'Making a success of working with employers' held in July 2008. The critical strategic success factors in relation to developing an employer-focused organisation outlined in the conference journal 16 were:

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Making a success of working with employers: dissemination conference journal

- employer responsiveness at the centre;
- strong commitment from senior managers;
- positive attitudes as the norm;
- expert communication from trainers and assessors;
- change management across the whole organisation;
- commitment to continuous improvement;
- robust planning and review processes;
- responsiveness to emerging trends;
- financial control and modelling;
- systems and processes aligned with employers' needs.

Excellence in employer-responsive colleges

The *Excellence in Employer Responsiveness Masterclass Consultation* conducted by KPMG for QIA **17** identified features of excellence in employer-responsive colleges. Strategic features included:

- an employer-responsive focus that began over five years ago;
- strategies and vision developed to reflect government and LSC priorities;
- energetic, proactive and creative senior leadership (including governors) creating an employer-led culture, structure and curriculum design;
- enthusiastic staff with relevant commercial and sector experience committed to meeting employer needs;
- a focus on meeting employer needs not selling qualifications;
- high-quality delivery evidenced in success rates and employer feedback;
- likely to have a dedicated enterprise or employer unit but assessing how to integrate across the whole college;
- seeking to expand delivery to widen participation;
- strong partnerships with key stakeholders and other colleges which enable them to strengthen their employer offer.

Successful colleges appear to have responded to a balance of external and internal factors eg government and LSC policy, programmes such as Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) and regional standards initiatives, such as Action for Business Colleges, and their own strategy and demand from employers. Excellence is:

- driven by effective leadership that sets the appropriate culture;
- supported by motivated and skilled staff working within a structure that empowers them to meet employers' needs;
- underpinned by high-quality delivery by expert staff.

17

Excellence in Employer Responsiveness Masterclass Consultation

Research and development

Resources for responsiveness

18

The Development Programme for Train to Gain Employer Responsiveness Resource Pack

The 2007 *Employer Responsiveness Resource Pack* 18 provides support materials to address the most critical issues emerging from the delivery of employer-responsive provision. It contains a module on ‘Developing responsive people and organisations’, which includes checklists, models, tools for analysis, case studies and scenarios to enable FE providers to develop an employer-responsive organisation.

It also includes advice on how to use the *Framework to measure and improve employer responsiveness* (available from www.excellencegateway.org.uk/wcs/webfm_send/173) to assess and address providers’ development needs in this area. The framework was drawn from research into effective practice and from a range of quality standards relating to responsive provision. It has been developed and modified through working with providers in the course of the Train to Gain Development Programme and continues to form part of the World Class Skills programme. The framework provides a comprehensive picture of responsiveness and enables providers to conduct an end-to-end review of their business processes and to produce development plans for improvement in line with their strategic and business plans. It also includes advice on how to conduct a self-assessment; what constitutes evidence of performance; and how to produce a development plan for improvement activity.

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Effective practice in employer engagement

Features of good practice in employer responsiveness

The 2008 report *Effective practice in employer engagement* 23 set out findings from research into effective practice in employer engagement, and identifying and facilitating sharing of good practice. Its findings informed the development of a framework of features of good practice in employer engagement on which the Department for Education and Skills had asked QIA to lead. Key features relating to employer focus were as follows.

- Employer engagement is explicitly recognised as an important activity throughout the provider through its inclusion in the mission statement, strategic objectives, planning targets and management structure.
- The provider’s training portfolio is driven by employer or labour market needs.

CoVEs and employer engagement

The 2008 RCU report *What is the impact of CoVE clusters on employer engagement and delivery?* **24** is focused on CoVEs* but many of the findings have more general relevance. It suggests that CoVEs have been effective in improving employer responsiveness, and that this is enhanced when a provider operates more than one CoVE. Key areas of good practice and critical success factors for developing a whole-organisation approach to employer engagement include:

- 12
- involvement of employers generating a high degree of ownership, and therefore engagement;
 - labour market information provided by the SSC helping to inform employer engagement activities;
 - effective partnerships with other providers, employers or other stakeholders generally characterised by joint ownership of needs analysis and a willingness to establish structures to increase responsiveness across units or organisations;
 - clustering of CoVEs being particularly effective where they serve a high concentration of relevant employment in the regional labour market;
 - freeing up manager time so that they can play an active role in external networks, listen more closely to employer needs and make better use of labour market information;
 - having CoVEs operating in several parts of a provider's curriculum range where their operations are coordinated and aligned to a clear strategic mission;
 - consistency and the development of a common culture;
 - lessons from CoVE operations learnt across the organisation: this will help to improve employers' perceptions, not just of the CoVEs but of FE provision in general.

Implementing Sector Skills Agreements

The SQW report *Assessing the impact of the implementation of Sector Skills Agreements* **25** looked at how the Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs) in sectors designated as pathfinders for SSA development were being put into place. It considered whether college and work-based training providers are responding to the SSAs and aligning their strategy and provision to better meet the needs of specific occupational sectors. The study found that many providers are barely aware of SSAs, and that some were not even aware of the existence of the relevant Sector Skills Council (SSC). This suggests that SSCs not only need to promote SSA objectives and their importance to providers, but to increase understanding of their own role.

24

What is the impact of CoVE clusters on employer engagement and delivery?

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The Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) programme was run by the LSC from 2000 to 2008. Over 400 CoVEs from FE colleges and work-based learning providers were established each with a specialist vocational area and funding to develop their work with employers. The CoVE programme has now been superseded by the Training Quality Standard (TQS), which provides a single, national accreditation for work with employers. Formal recognition for vocational excellence is now awarded through the TQS.

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Assessing the impact of the implementation of Sector Skills Agreements

The introduction of SSAs has encouraged joint working and a process of structured dialogue between the various agencies involved in the delivery of training. SSAs are gradually starting to have an impact on the LSC planning processes, which should make it easier for providers to ensure implementation. However, very few institutions identified SSAs as their principal guide to delivery and the development of SSAs tended to be ad hoc.

Challenges to the FE system

The 2008 report, *Research into the FE system's development needs to meet the challenge of the implementation of World Class Skills*, 27 summarises the findings from a major consultation exercise with the FE system to help them respond to the implementation plan for the Leitch Review of Skills. Findings that relate to the development of an employer-focused mission and strategy are as follows.

- Most providers expect the biggest impact to be on financial management, staff skills and the development of services for employers. They expect to need external help and support in a wide range of aspects, including setting a clear strategic direction, securing appropriate staff skills and developing relevant products and services.
- Providers anticipate a wide range of opportunities from the increased employer-responsive funding and the opening up of contracts to competitive tendering, but are conscious that not all of them will gain from this approach. The uncertainty of future funding is a major cause for concern and they are also concerned that although funding for this area is growing, Train to Gain activity is likely to generate low profit margins.
- Providers also see major challenges in improving the robustness of local labour market intelligence and in bringing the systems and roles within business development units fully under their organisation's quality assurance and performance review systems.
- Overall, many providers think that the implementation of the Leitch Review of Skills presents considerable risks as well as opportunities and are keen to identify typical (as well as particularly effective) practice within the FE system to reassure them. This will be most valuable when it relates to difficult markets or new income streams, such as Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) provision.

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Research into the FE system's development needs to meet the challenge of the implementation of World Class Skills

Far-reaching change to FE providers

QIA's Development Programme for Train to Gain provided Whole Organisation Consultancies (WOC) for providers wishing to improve their responsiveness to employers. The report, *Whole Organisation Consultancy: an analysis of completed frameworks to measure and improve employer responsiveness*, **28** described the initial findings from an analysis of completed WOC reviews and trends and issues emerging from them. The WOC process is based on facilitated self-assessments of colleges and training providers against a framework to measure and improve employer responsiveness. The framework provides a range of quality indicators organised under headings relating to the key stages of interaction between employers and their workforce with providers. Findings relating to the development of employer-focused provision suggest the following.

- Many providers are working to develop appropriate leadership and management approaches to support employer responsiveness across their organisation, but few have this fully in place. They need to develop capacity to review performance against strategy and make improvements. The lack of effective leadership and management for employer responsiveness could prevent widespread achievement of the Training Quality Standard.
- Many providers have administrative and organisational processes to deal effectively with the initial stages of the interface with employers but positive attitudes to employer responsiveness are still not the norm across the whole organisation and networking with the business community is poorly developed. Improvements are needed to ensure that the organisation is able to fully meet employers' needs and to embed employer responsiveness as a key purpose.

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Whole Organisation Consultancy: an analysis of completed frameworks to measure and improve employer responsiveness

Employers' views on changing the FE system

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*Reaching further:
workforce development
through employer-FE
college partnership*

The CBI report *Reaching further: workforce development through employer-FE college partnership* (January 2009) 30 reiterated the UK's need to have more people in the workforce with higher levels of skills to become an economy based on high added-value goods and services and cope with increased global competition. It noted the government's commitment to support colleges in working more effectively with businesses and to create a demand-led system. FE colleges are well established as a major source of skills provision and many already have strong links with employers. This report gives examples of colleges and employers working together successfully to achieve high-quality, relevant workforce training and provides lessons in how to engage together effectively. The following key conclusions emerged from the research in relation to developing an employer-focused mission and strategy.

- Colleges need to be clear about the place of employer engagement in their overall strategies. Where this is a major aim, commitment must permeate the whole organisation and be communicated to staff.
- Developing a reputation for sectoral expertise can be a major asset.
- Dialogue with employers on training issues must be based on skill needs and conducted in business language, not on qualifications and in the language of education.

Understand who are the key policy influencers

The landscape of key policy influencers in learning and skills is changing, for example:

- the creation of UK Commission for Employment and Skills will have major implications for the FE sector;
- changes to the LSC will result in different funding and regulatory arrangements;
- the increased responsibilities of the SSCs through the SSAs will have implications for the content and assessment of the vocational curriculum.

Questions to address

- ▶ Do you and your colleagues know who are the key players and their roles and responsibilities in policy development?
- ▶ Do you or your colleagues have links with any local or regional representatives of these bodies?
- ▶ Are you aware of development activity relating to these bodies?
- ▶ What is being done to look at the impact of SSAs? What links are there with SSCs?

Developing provision to meet employers' needs

Basingstoke College of Technology (available from www.excellencegateway.org.uk/wcs/webfm_send/223) saw that the Leitch Review (with its focus on improving the skills and qualifications of people already at work) and having to operate in a market with limited 16–19 growth meant that workplace training was a vital business area for them. They set about:

- reorganising their commercial operation to meet local employers' business needs rather than focusing on LSC success criteria;
- focusing on the college's contribution to businesses, as well as to the achievement of individual trainees;
- increasing understanding of the market and meeting real needs.

Questions to address

- ▶ How far is employer engagement embedded in the organisation's strategic plan?
- ▶ Are targets set for employer engagement for all departments?
- ▶ Are systems in place to capture and use local market information?

Implications for practice – what should providers do?

Recognition of employer engagement as a key role for the organisation

At Tresham Institute (available from www.excellencegateway.org.uk/wcs/webfm_send/190) the directors of marketing and employer responsiveness explored in some detail the Institute's vision, mission and objectives in relation to employer engagement and produced a strategy for employer engagement. This was then debated and developed at an event involving key players from across the college, as well as representatives of the Northamptonshire Partnership and the Learning and Skills Council. A detailed action plan was created to deliver the vision, mission and strategic objectives, and this is now being shared with key staff across the college. Key lessons have emerged from this process:

- the importance of a clear vision linked to time-bound operational actions;
- the need to keep raising the profile of employer responsiveness through both formal and informal communications.

Questions to address

- ▶ How far are employers seen as key customers across the organisation?
- ▶ What strategies are in place to raise awareness of employers as key customers?
- ▶ Do you have an action plan to increase awareness of the importance of employers as customers?

Developing capacity for employer responsiveness

ETS (available from www.excellencegateway.org.uk/wcs/webfm_send/183) is a work-based learning provider based in Exeter. It offers training solutions for employers across a range of work-based learning skills, through Apprenticeships, Train to Gain and full-cost recovery work.

ETS noted that the key to success is to incorporate the strategies for employer engagement into daily corporate diary thinking time, analysis and business reviews. Conducting an audit of their employer responsiveness through the Employer Responsiveness Framework (ERF) helped them develop innovative thinking around the needs of the business and continuous reviews of the impact the business was having on its client base. It also introduced new elements of team cohesion and buy-in.

ETS developed market analysis and understanding that enhanced strategic thinking and decision-making and ultimately cascaded down into greater use and determination of the organisation's delivery mechanisms and resources.

Questions to address

- ▶ Has your organisation completed an audit using a tool such as the Framework?
- ▶ Is there a development plan in place to develop your organisation's capacity to be more responsive to employers?

Included in review items

Key features of employer-responsive provision

Policy development

Consultation and feedback

Research and development

Employer-focused mission and strategy

We explicitly recognise the importance of employer responsiveness throughout our organisation

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Our training portfolio is driven by employer and labour market needs

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

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Marketing and infrastructure to support employer engagement

We are aware of the business needs of employers and are committed to fulfilling them

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We provide employers with consistent, named contacts who understand their business

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We have appropriate and dependable administrative systems for employer-facing work

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We record all interactions with employers and use this information for planning and marketing

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We provide high-quality organisational and training needs analysis services

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We enable employers to secure appropriate training at a reasonable cost

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28 29 30

Here the items from the review catalogue are mapped to the key features of responsive provision identified in QIA's *Supporting good practice in employer responsiveness: a guide to quality improvement* (2008).

Mapping key features to the review

Included in review items

Key features of employer-responsive provision	Policy development	Consultation and feedback	Research and development
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Flexible and relevant delivery

We are able to provide training promptly in response to identified needs	2 6	14 15 16 17	18 20 23 27 28 30
We provide training in a way that minimises disturbance to the employer’s business and is delivered flexibly	4 5 6	17 18	18 20 23 26 28 30
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	5 6 8	16	18 19 20 22 23 25 30
Our trainers and assessors are experts and interact effectively with employers and their workforce	1 2 4 9 10	14 15 16 17	18 20 22 24 28 30
We ensure that we use high-quality, appropriate training resources	3		18 23 24 26 30

Quality improvement

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	1 2 3 4 5 7 9 10	15	18 20 27 28 30
We evaluate all our training and have rigorous quality assurance arrangements to continually improve the service	8	14 16 17	18 19 21 27 28 30
We share information and good practice with our colleagues to enable everyone to improve	9 10	15 17	19 20 21 24 25 27

Networks and partnerships

We are part of local training networks and partnerships aiming to improve the service to employers	1 3 4 5 9 11	12 13 14 15 17	18 19 22 25 26 27
We support networks of local employers to improve their access to training	3 6		20 24 27

Support for business development

We support employers’ wider activities, such as using expertise or facilities for product development, or encourage them to use similar support from other sources	9 10 11	12 13	23
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