Improving employer responsiveness

Policy, consultation and research: the key messages

Research

LSIS LEARNING
AND SKILLS
IMPROVEMENT
SERVICE

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Quality improvement for employer responsiveness

Disability equality policy

LSIS is committed to promoting equality
for disabled people and we strive to
ensure that all our communication
and learning materials are available
in various formats including large font,
audio or Braille. Please let us know
if you consider yourself disabled and
require reasonable adjustments made
to support you.

* The Learning and Skills
Improvement Service
is the new sector-owned
body, formed in October
2008 from CEL and QIA.

* These are not necessarily
the views of LSIS.

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Quality improvement for employer responsiveness

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 development of quality improvement for employer responsiveness.
It is one of a series of six pamphlets that consider how the FE sector can develop employer-responsive provision. The others are as follows.

1 Developing an employer-focused mission and strategy

2 Marketing and infrastructure to support employer engagement

3 Flexible and relevant delivery for employer-facing provision

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 14 and 15 for a mapping of the review items to these key features.*****

Features of quality improvement for employer responsiveness

Quality improvement for employer responsiveness is a central component of the reform of the FE system. Key features relating to this aspect of the service include:

- helping employers to identify the likely impact of training and development on their business and to measure the impact in the short and long terms;
- evaluating training and having rigorous quality assurance arrangements to continually improve the service;
- sharing information and good practice with colleagues to enable everyone to improve.

Issues emerging from the review relating to quality improvement for employer responsiveness are considered in the sections that follow.

Policy development

Quality improvement as a key concern for policy makers

The report from the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) *Further education: raising skills, improving life chances: update July 2007* **7** reported progress on proposals in the 2006 FE White Paper, **4** which set out plans for the New Standard for employer-responsive provision and vocational excellence (now the Training Quality Standard, TQS), National Skills Academies, professional standards for teachers, tutors and trainers, QIA's Support Programme for Train to Gain, and the work of the Higher Level Skills Pathfinders. The number and scope of these developments indicate the importance of the quality improvement of the FE service for policy-makers.

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Further education: raising skills, improving life chances: update July 2007

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Further education: raising skills, improving life chances

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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 superceded 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.

1

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

4

Further education: raising skills, improving life chances

3

14–19 education and skills

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

5

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

8

World-class Apprenticeships: unlocking talent, building skills for all

Standards for work with employers

Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs)* have been frequently mentioned in relation to their re-accreditation **1** and the link between this and the development of standards for work with employers (now the TQS). This was later expanded in the 2006 White Paper *Further education: raising skills, improving life chances* **4** which proposed the development of a new Standard for Employer Responsiveness to replace Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) and other quality standards.

Partnerships for quality

The 2005 *14–19 education and skills* White Paper **3** outlined the role of CoVEs, alongside FE more generally, in providing vocational leadership in the development of a network of high-quality facilities linking specialist schools in each area to CoVEs and National Skills Academies.

Another theme in recent policy development relates to improving 14–19 provision through Education Improvement Partnerships to enable schools and other providers to collaborate to raise standards **3** and a 'Centre of Excellence' standard for 16–19 provision. **4**

Feedback from users

A number of policy proposals refer to listening to the voice of learners through a National Learner Panel and improved learner feedback, **4** and strengthening the employer voice by merging the Sector Skills Development Agency and National Employer Panel to create a Commission for Employment and Skills.* **5**

Raising performance

There are also references to the role of inspection in providing a lever to tackle underperformance, **3** and the need for robust quality assurance to secure consistently high standards in Apprenticeships. **8**

Consultation and feedback

Responses from the sector on the policy issues relating to quality improvement can be divided into concerns about what needs to improve and how to bring about improvement.

What needs to improve in employer-responsive provision?

The CEL★ policy seminars on implementing the Leitch Review of Skills `14` noted that there are leadership challenges arising from the Leitch proposals and continuing FE reforms. Increased self-regulation requires leadership behaviour that delivers transformational change at every level. Leaders need to create the conditions for innovation and high performance.

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The consultation on the World Class Skills support programme `15` suggested that excellence is:

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

The development needs of successful colleges are similar to those needing more support, but the input required is more detailed and in-depth – developing rather than establishing practice.

Other specific needs identified by the review included:

- benchmarking the effectiveness of employer engagement, including successful progression from legislation-driven Level 2 to voluntary Level 3; `27`
- successful strategies for quality control, learner tracking and monitoring in e-delivery (including harnessing IT to support virtual learning environments); `27`
- measuring the impact of provision for employers. `15`

How to bring about improvement in employer responsiveness

The need for commitment to continuous improvement and robust planning and review processes was pointed out by the Train to Gain Development Programme dissemination events. `16`

The Centre for Excellence (CEL) policy seminars on implementing the Leitch Review of Skills `14` pointed out that leaders in colleges and work-based learning providers need to:

- review operations and delivery systems from the perspective of the individual and corporate customer;
- ensure that definitions of quality and priorities for improvement are driven by customer experiences and satisfaction.

Staff skills and capacity in institutions such as the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), CEL and QIA (now LSIS) and the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) would also need to adapt to anticipate and support these new roles and business processes.

The consultation on the World Class Skills support programme **15** made valuable points about how quality improvement support should be provided, notably:

- delivery models must be appropriate to the target audience – on-site delivery is best for front-line staff whereas managers are able to travel away from base;
- the sector should be actively involved in the programme through peer review and networks;
- the programme should be delivered regionally and should take variations in regional needs into account;
- rurality and rural issues should be considered;
- the programme should not be solely college focused.

This same report observed that consultancy for individual providers may enable them to grow holistically to meet the challenges of employer responsiveness but the consultants must hold the appropriate skills and background to ensure that the development process begins with, and is actively supported by, the board and chief executive.

The KPMG Masterclass Consultation **17** considered how successful colleges have achieved excellence and concluded that they respond to a balance of external and internal factors, eg government and LSC policy, initiatives such as CoVEs and Action for Business Colleges (a regional standard to promote quality in employer-responsive provision), as well as their own strategy and demands from employers.

The same consultation asked about the role of successful colleges in the development of other providers and this enquiry indicated that:

- successful colleges are willing to support other providers, but some are concerned about sharing practice that might be commercially sensitive;
- staff involved in support activity need to have the right personal qualities;
- colleges were positive about receiving payment but concerned about the amount of time needed for preparation. Their time would be maximised if support materials and workshops were ready prepared.

Research and development activity

Improving the quality of Apprenticeships

The 2008 ORC International research report *Assessing the reasons for improvements in Apprenticeships completion* **19** considered reasons for the dramatic increase in achievement in Apprenticeship frameworks over recent years and came to the following conclusions.

- There is no single reason: a combination of related external factors, such as changes to the policy and funding environment, and internal factors is likely to have led to improvement.

- Internal factors were generally changes by the provider in the context of wider programme re-organisation or re-structuring and all were characterised by one or more of the following:
- senior management commitment and buy-in;
- self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses;
- strategic planning and detailed action-planning to address weaknesses;
- team-working to implement change.

- Effective communication and collaboration between the employer, provider and learner together with wholehearted commitment to Apprenticeships were central to success.

- Actions contributing to improvement included:
- consistent information throughout recruitment;
- enhanced quality management and assurance system;
- re-structuring programmes;
- employer involvement;
- staff – recruitment, qualifications and development;
- learner-centred ethos and approach.

The Improvement Project approach

The Improvement Project approach to quality development has been used in the Development Programme for Train to Gain. It involves:

- conducting an audit of the provider's current performance against criteria for effective practice specifically related to the topic area;
- seeking the views of employers and other stakeholders on the audit results;
- identifying priorities for development;
- testing new approaches and solutions;
- evaluating the applicability and impact of the solutions.

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Assessing the reasons for improvements in Apprenticeships completion

Reports on Year 1 and Year 2 projects suggest emerging issues relating to quality improvement.

The report on Year 1 projects, *Development Programme for Train to Gain: Year 1 Improvement Projects* [20] made the following observations:

- participants liked the Improvement Projects' structured approach;
- establishing the starting point is crucial to ensure that development activity matches the development needs. The audit provides criteria for good practice and enables providers to assess and address their performance and focus on improving service priorities;
- projects sought the views of employers and other stakeholders, identified priorities for development, tested new approaches and solutions and evaluated the applicability and impact of the solutions.

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The report on Year 2 of the projects, *Train to Gain Improvement Projects 2007/08* [21] reiterated the value of a systematic approach to development with informed and effective consultancy support, making the following points.

- Organisational commitment to the projects affects results.
- Different projects need different types of support, ie:
- where organisations are at an early stage of development, project leaders may be isolated and value external support and direction;
- providers with modest levels of employer-responsive delivery need to work internally to establish underpinning principles and processes before looking at more specific work. They need to know how to produce and implement an action plan, use ongoing evaluation and win support from key colleagues.
- Progress can be made more quickly, even where responsiveness to employers is low, if key managers have identified the need for, and are committed to, change. Consultants can assist the process by maintaining a clear focus on employer clients.
- Organisations with policies and ways of working in place and a strategic commitment to change are able to undertake developmental activities with employer partners that give rise to improved relationships with employers and higher quality of services.
- Strong, effective and consistent project management is needed. Better audits, action plans and case studies result from projects led by senior staff.

- Providers who used the Improvement Projects to support their TQS application made significant gains.

- Taking part in the Improvement Projects was a significant continuing professional development (CPD) experience regardless of the extent of the outcomes. Project participants developed skills to work with colleagues at all levels of the organisation and were more aware of appropriate dialogue that would lead to better results.

- Networking, consultancy support, comparative analysis and dissemination of emerging outcomes were vital components.

Using the Employer Responsiveness Framework

10 The Employer Responsiveness Resource Pack, [18] drew on the experiences of the Improvement Projects and other aspects of the Development Programme for Train to Gain to provide materials and advice on how to improve employer responsiveness. It provides a comprehensive picture of what responsiveness entails and enables providers to conduct an end-to-end review of their business processes and produce development plans for improvement. Modules include 'Working with employers as customers', 'Developing flexible delivery', 'Developing responsive people and organisations', and 'Partnerships for Train to Gain' and there is extensive information on using the Framework to Measure and Improve Employer Responsiveness.*

The extent to which providers are able to evaluate learning and their programme of support for employers was considered in *Whole Organisation Consultancy: an analysis of completed frameworks to measure and improve employer responsiveness*. [28] This report observed an extremely variable level of provision, although providers reported a substantial amount of development activity. About a third of the providers in the sample said that the evaluation of the impact of training (an important aspect of the service) is fully in place.

[18]
The Development Programme for Train to Gain Employer Responsiveness Resource Pack

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The Framework continues to be used in the World Class Skills programme but has been renamed the Employer Responsiveness Framework (ERF).

[28]
Whole Organisation Consultancy: an analysis of completed frameworks to measure and improve employer responsiveness

Understanding what needs to be improved

The review reflects the need to distinguish between identifying what needs to improve to secure high-quality employer responsiveness and the means of improvement. Matching the content of improvement activity to the medium of support is thus very important.

The Employer Responsiveness Framework provides a comprehensive audit and development-planning tool, based on the concept of the Employer Journey. Conducting this audit – either independently or with consultancy support – enables providers to understand their current level of responsiveness and develop a plan for improvement.

Implications for practice – what should providers do?

Measuring impact

DC Training & Development Services Ltd (available from www.excellencegateway. org.uk/wcs/webfm_send/182) is a small private training provider offering NVQ and management development programmes to the manufacturing, warehousing and customer-service sectors. They achieved Part A of the TQS in November 2007. During the TQS accreditation process they saw the need to enhance how they measured the impact of their training programmes on employer business needs. They knew they could engage employers and take employees through to successful outcomes as they had achieved an 88% qualification success rate in the Employer Training Pilot (ETP). They were already focused on employers' business needs but the consultancy they received from the Development Programme for Train to Gain helped them to formalise this process.

DC Training already had well-established procedures for working with learners based on the Learner Journey and they supplemented these by considering the Employer Journey. DC Training decided to make the impact of training on business needs more explicit to employers in preparation for the employer validation aspect of the TQS and also as an opportunity to identify new business opportunities.

Employers understood what we were trying to do in looking at impact on business needs, and how it could help them get better value from the training.
Paul Brackenbury, Operations Director, DC Training

The company had a lot of repeat business so they felt that employers must be satisfied but they didn't necessarily know why. Looking at the Employer Journey helped with that. They worked with some of their key employers to develop a framework for identifying the impact of their services on the business needs of their clients. They now talk to employers in a language employers understand. They are far less likely to talk about retention and achievement and more likely to talk about business competitiveness, staff skills, quality of supervision, staff attitude, service quality and compliance with company and industry guidelines.

Questions to address

▶ To what extent are the following in place in your organisation:

- an entrepreneurial culture and capacity;
- staff who can talk to employers on a business-to-business basis;
- business models that are fit for a demand-led system;
- operations and delivery systems appropriate for the corporate customer;
- definitions of quality and priorities for improvement driven by customer experiences and satisfaction;
- capacity to design curriculum and qualifications to meet employers' needs?

▶ Do you routinely involve employers in providing feedback on your services?

▶ Have you got robust systems for identifying the impact of your services on employers' business performance?

▶ To what extent is your provision influenced by this feedback?

Ways of bringing about improvement

Providers need to recognise the levers for bringing about a change from an organisational focus on young, full-time learners to meeting the needs of the local economy, employers and employees. This requires senior management commitment and direction. It can also be influenced by the role of inspection in tackling underperformance and standards such as TQS.

City of Bristol College (available from www.excellencegateway.org.uk/wcs/webfm_send/224) discovered that the TQS and the Employer Responsiveness agenda require colleges to:

- make cultural changes to the way staff perceive their relationships with employers, their roles in sales and marketing activities, and their understanding of the changing nature of the funding context;
- set up systems and processes such as recording and responding to enquiries from employers and evaluating the impact of training on employers;
- focus on staff skills such as sales and marketing.

They needed an approach that would consider the whole organisation with all of its related parts – not just a Business Development Unit. A thorough, organisation-wide review is a good starting point and then any development activity must consider employer responsiveness across the college as a whole. The college used the Employer Responsiveness Framework to prepare their application for the TQS and start a process of cultural change across the college.

Following the review and analysis, the findings were presented to the heads of faculty and employer strand managers who contributed to a cross-college presentation about employer responsiveness, the Skills Agenda and the TQS. This presentation was given to all staff across the college as part of preparing the whole organisation for the TQS, with follow-up activities for each faculty to explore what it meant for each person on a day-to-day basis.

The first step in improving employer responsiveness and preparing for the TQS for City of Bristol College was to undertake a comprehensive review of the college's practice in relation to employers. The huge amount of resulting information was analysed and colour-coded in charts that showed practice across the whole college at a glance. Each faculty then gave a presentation to all staff to communicate their particular message about employer responsiveness across such a large college. This was followed with interactive workshops to enable faculty members to explore the implications for their work.

Questions to address

▶ How far has the message about the need for employer responsiveness permeated your organisation?

▶ To what extent have you considered the relationship between the different quality measures, such as TQS, Ofsted inspection and the Framework for Excellence (see the map, available from www.excellencegateway.org.uk/wcs/webfm_send/271, and background document, available from www.excellencegateway.org.uk/wcs/webfm_send/270).

Key features of employer-responsive provision	Included in review items		
	Policy development	Consultation and feedback	Research and development
Employer-focused mission and strategy			
We explicitly recognise the importance of employer responsiveness throughout our organisation	1 2 3 4 5 9 10	14 15 16 17	18 23 24 27 30
Our training portfolio is driven by employer and labour market needs	1 2 3 4 5 6 10	16	18 23 24 28 29 30
We have detailed knowledge of national, regional and local skills needs and likely business developments	1 2 3 4 5 6 9 10	14 15 16	18 23 24 27 28 30
Marketing and infrastructure to support employer engagement			
We are aware of the business needs of employers and are committed to fulfilling them	1 2 3 4 5 7	14 15 16 17	18 20 23 24 28 30
We provide employers with consistent, named contacts who understand their business		17	18 20 23 27 30
We have appropriate and dependable administrative systems for employer-facing work		14 15 16 17	18 20 23 28 30
We record all interactions with employers and use this information for planning and marketing		16 17	18 20 23 28 30
We provide high-quality organisational and training needs analysis services		16	18 20 22 23 28 30
We enable employers to secure appropriate training at a reasonable cost	4 5	15 16	18 20 23 24 25 27 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

Key features of employer-responsive provision	Included in review items		
	Policy development	Consultation and feedback	Research and development
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