

Skills and Employer Responsiveness (SER) programme

Improving efficiency at Birmingham Metropolitan College



Introduction

Birmingham Metropolitan College (BMET) is hoping to slash costs and improve its efficiency by using one awarding body for all the qualifications in an Apprenticeship framework instead of a plethora of different ones.

The move, being seriously considered by the College, was suggested as a direct result of support they received from the Skills and Employer Responsiveness (SER) programme funded by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service.

Lynn Pritchatt, the College's Associate Director of Business Development, explains that although the College had been asked by the 157 Group to be the lead for the West Midlands Region in phase one of the SER Programme, there were areas it wanted to improve on itself:

"We wanted sector support on the delivery of key and functional skills within an Apprenticeship framework – which is something we need to improve on – and securing employer contributions for general delivery," she says.

"For a long time, Train To Gain has been very advantageous for companies and they've managed to train their workforce at very little cost, but with the funding changes happening from 1 August 2011 there's going to be more of a responsibility on the employer to pay for training."

The intervention

College staff attended workshops throughout phase one and two of the SER programme, consultants came into the college, and various people at the college helped by giving their input, advice and guidance on how the college should move forward.

What happened as a result of the intervention?

"It's helped us to shape where the organisation is going in the backdrop of the rapidly-changing FE landscape that we're seeing at the moment," says Lynn.

"It's enabled us to step back and review processes, what we do and how we do things. The networking element has been exceptional, as we've been able to share good practice among other colleges in the sector, as well as the independent providers who can give a lot of support to colleges. They do some things perhaps slightly better than colleges. They're a little bit smaller and have a greater ability to focus on niche markets whereas colleges tend to cover all the subject sector areas."

Lynn says the SER support enabled college staff to take some time out – an opportunity she describes as very rare – to examine how they do things and see if they could do them differently.

"In these times of budget cuts, we're examining why we do things and whether we need to do them.

“Key skills and functional skill delivery within an Apprenticeship framework has been a challenge for quite some time, as it probably has been for other colleges. So we’ll be looking at how that can be delivered.

“We have different awarding bodies for different elements of a qualification, so both in terms of efficiency and cost, it’s a bit of a monster to manage, particularly when you’re dealing with as many Apprenticeship frameworks as a college of our size does.

“We’ve looked at a one-stop shop model using one awarding body that offers accreditation for all the component qualifications. That has massive benefits apart from efficiencies and cost savings.”

Lynn describes the support from the LSIS-funded SER Programme as excellent.

“It’s enabled us to put ourselves on a regional and national platform as a college and share what we’ve learned with other providers.

What challenges and barriers were there and how did you deal with them to make the changes?

She believes the major barrier is, and will continue to be, getting people into work in the new era of skills conditionality and outcomes incentive payments.

“We are working with curriculum colleagues on the worklessness agenda, which will require much more flexible roll-on, roll-off provision, which some curriculum areas are not used to providing. That’s potentially going to be a hurdle we have to overcome as a college.

“There’s been a lot of work going on over recent months and we’ll continue to raise the profile of this agenda within the college.”

So how expensive has it been for the college to benefit from the SER support?

“It’s not cost us anything in financial terms but there’s been quite a significant investment in my time,” says Lynn.

What was the impact?

Although everyone involved is upbeat and optimistic that the support from the SER programme will bring tangible benefits, Lynn says that she and those she canvassed feel it is a little too early to assess the difference it has made to learners and employers.

“Six months down the line we’ll be able to do a piece of work that would give us that,” she says.

“We have very, very strong networks with employer bodies such as the Chamber of Commerce and the CBI, and one of the big things we’re hoping for is a significant increase in the number of Apprenticeships and the range of Apprenticeship delivery that we have in the college.

“The same applies to the employment agenda. We’re working with three of the DWP [Department for Work and Pensions] prime contractors and have very close links with Jobcentre Plus.

“Both need to grow extensively during the next academic year and beyond. BMET have a dedicated sales team of business development managers and advisers so we’re quite lucky that we’re able to get employer contributions.

“The gist of the support we had was that it was very much a case of carry on doing what we’re doing but perhaps doing more of it. That’s encouraging and reassuring.”

What were the benefits for your organisation?

“First and foremost among the benefits to us was the networking the SER programme enabled us to participate in, sharing good practice with other providers.

“Being a regional lead with the exposure we’ve had can only benefit the college and stand us in good stead.”

What were the measurable results?

Lynn says the college intends to measure the results internally and show what it has gained from the SER support.

Is any further follow-up action planned?

“We don’t know what’s going to happen come the autumn. So we’d be interested in continued support in areas we need – and, in areas where we’ve developed our own expertise, we’d be happy to share it and benefit the wider sector as a whole.”

Key learning points

- Consider using just one awarding body instead of a host of different ones for all the qualifications you offer.
- Network as much as you can, and learn all you can by sharing effective practice.
- Take a step back and question what you do, why you do it, and whether you even need to.
- Adapt and survive, or suffer the consequences.

Contact details

Lynn Pritchatt

lynn.pritchatt@bmetc.ac.uk

Current at July 2011

The Skills and Employer Responsiveness (SER) programme is funded by LSIS. It is a sector-led programme running to August 2011 tasked with increasing the capacity of all providers in the learning and skills sector to work with employers and help address the current and future skills needs of their business and workforce.

The SER programme is managed in the **East of England, East Midlands and West Midlands** by ALP, the 157 Group, NIACE and AoC. It offers support in three key strands:

- Employer Responsiveness
- Apprenticeship provision
- Pre-employment provision and transition into work.

The programme offers a variety of support including workshops, webinars, coaching and tailored support.

In partnership with:

