

# Using competitions to move from competence to excellence



## Case study

### South West Region Skills and Employer Responsiveness (SER) programme



*These are two of the winners in hair and beauty*

## Summary

This case study, produced for the LSIS Skills and Employer Responsiveness (SER) programme by City of Bristol College, describes how the College, working with local employers, encouraged learners to get involved in skills-based competitions so that they could develop higher level skills and move from competence to excellence. This in turn improved learners' confidence, employer-trainer relationships, retention on programmes and success. Competitions were undertaken across a variety of sectors. City of Bristol College, as a lead provider for the LSIS Skills and Employer Responsiveness (SER) programme, shared their experienced with other providers as part of the programme of activities delivered in the South West region.

## Sector relevance

This case study is aimed at a range of individuals and teams in training provider organisations. It should be of particular interest to staff in further education colleges, sixth form colleges and private work-based learning providers and can be applied to any sector that has regional and national competitions for the 16+ learner.

## Overview

The College has many learners on vocational courses and extensive Apprenticeship provision. Its strategic priority is to achieve outstanding quality standards to enable individuals to develop skills and training so that they can achieve their employment goals and to strengthen partnerships with employers beyond providing training.

NVQs, unlike graded academic qualifications, are competence based and only offer a pass level. They do not challenge and recognise the most able learners. Students miss the opportunity to show that they are outstanding and employers are not always able to select better candidates from potential employees.

The College therefore decided to initiate a project called 'From Competence to Excellence', which involved working with employers to encourage students to be competitive and achieve awards at a local and national level. Students were also encouraged to gain City & Guilds (C&G) star units that recognise special employment skills on top of their NVQ qualifications.

## Project details

The objectives of the project were to work with employers to:

- promote excellence in skills in the college;
- encourage high-profile participation in UK Skills events;
- motivate and enable vocational learners to reach the highest skills levels and aim for excellence and mastery of skills;
- raise the profile of vocational skills locally and regionally;
- train a team of vocational excellence coaches to stretch and challenge the most talented learners;



*Stone therapy*

- develop the skills of vocational tutors, through training in coaching techniques, to foster professional pride and provide evidence of continuing professional development.

To achieve this, the following key activities were undertaken:

- coaching for entries to skills competitions motivated by the forthcoming WorldSkills 2011 event in London;
- showing learners high-profile demonstrations of the excellence that can be achieved in vocational skills;
- using C&G star units to enable vocational learners to aim for, reach, and be recognised for high skill levels within their vocational area. The star units accredit exceptional performance in candidates completing vocational, competence-based qualifications. They build on the current NVQ competence model and differentiate between candidates who are competent and those who go the extra mile and deliver higher standards and quality in the workplace. They challenge the concept that competent is the ceiling of achievement for candidates completing NVQs.

All these activities could be undertaken by most training providers in the UK.

Costs included:

- time and travel to attend competitive events;
- awarding body charges for the star awards;
- a special 'WorldSkills' celebration event held at the start of the autumn term to thank sponsors, students, employers and teachers.

It was seen as essential that the whole college was engaged and proactive steps were taken to make this happen – from the senior leadership team giving it high priority, through the faculties to the programme leaders who would ultimately deliver. Whole college engagement was one of the key challenges.

## **Support from employers**

The success of the initiative relied on effective partnerships with employers and support from them in:

- providing work placements and Apprenticeships to develop and enhance skills;
- supporting and mentoring students, e.g. uniformed services took part in training days with the public services team and the hairdressing squad used world championship hairdressers to mentor students;
- motivating the learners to strive for excellence in competitions.

“Through my role as an instructor I have been able to forge links with the emergency services and armed forces that would not have happened if WorldSkills had not been mentioned. It seems everyone is up for a competition.

“The emergency services who helped asked to be kept informed of the students' progress, and at least one of them has included an article about their involvement with the students in their in-house publication.

“Importantly, for the students who wish to pursue a career in the emergency services, there is a need to gain life experiences in order for them to answer personal qualities and attribute (PQA) questions. Participating in the WorldSkills games helps the students to gain these important PQAs.”

Alan Middleton, Public Services Lecturer

## Outcomes

Many of the vocational areas of the College were successful in the WorldSkills competitions, including:

- Hair and beauty (May 2010):  
Beauty therapy regional event at NEC – 2<sup>nd</sup> place  
Theatrical make-up – 1<sup>st</sup> place  
South west regional heat UK Skills – 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> for both Advanced and Intermediate
- Construction (June 2010):  
Regional Skill Build competition, bricklaying junior 2<sup>nd</sup>, senior 1<sup>st</sup>
- Business (April 2010):  
AAT accountancy competition, three teams – one team reached the national final of UK Skills and achieved the silver award (see photo, right)
- Hospitality (April 2010):  
Salon Culinaire competition at the Bournemouth catering exhibition – seven silver, eight bronze, six merits and one highly commended for UK skills cooking. A student who was an early school leaver won a C&G Medal for Excellence and received the C&G Lion Award.
- Public Services (May 2010):  
Uniform service southern event: 2<sup>nd</sup> out of 24 teams and 4<sup>th</sup> in national final.



*AAT accountancy team*

## Impact – student success

This initiative has not only raised the skills of students involved in the competitions, but motivated others within the groups to aim high. The curriculum areas involved in the project have shown significant improvement in retention. For example:

- NVQ Hair retention improved by 3%;
- NVQ Beauty Therapy retention improved by 8%;
- NVQ Accounting retention improved by 8%;
- Diploma in Carpentry retention improved by 5%.

In competition work and preparation for the C&G star units, learners benefited from striving for excellence beyond the normal competence expectation of NVQ programmes.

Learners completing star units recorded aspiration, attitude, commitment, application, interpersonal skills and inspiration. Feedback has demonstrated the growth they have made individually. Public Service student Ceri Stevens who competed in the uniformed service team event said:

“I found that the more you work as a team and think as a team the more you can achieve.”

### **Impact – employers**

After each competition students completed an evaluation to assess what they felt they had gained from the experience. A College research project established what learners gained from competition work and star unit preparation, using focus group feedback.

Employers were asked to evaluate the benefits in terms of:

- the skills development of their employees;
- opportunities to get involved with training programmes through sponsorship and work-based support;
- positive publicity resulting from their business’s participation.

Employers were invited to the Skills award evening held in September and reported that they were thrilled by the success of their employees.

### **Useful links**

The SER Excellence Gateway page; <http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/ser>

### **Contact information**

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