Employer Survey Analysis

Introduction

Work placements and job outcomes are the ultimate outcome of all training. Every training institution aims to help learners develop the skills they need for life as well as those skills that are appropriate for their chosen career. Changing industry needs, technology advancements and changes in lifestyle require training providers to develop adaptive and evolving curricula.

ELATT conducted a project to redevelop our curriculum in the light of the introduction of the Qualification and Credits Framework (QCF). Introduced in 2010, the QCF is the new way of recognising achievement - through the award of credit for units and qualifications - across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Awarding organisations have embraced vendor qualifications and introduced several modules to offer new vocational qualifications that are more responsive to industry needs.

The redevelopment project was funded by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS). The aim of the project was to establish gaps in current IT curriculum provision and understand the skills that meet employer demands and needs. The research was an essential step towards fulfilment of the project. A questionnaire was designed to support semi-structured interviews with employer representatives and the research was conducted with seven local employers. The questions were designed to focus on understanding employers IT needs and the IT skills that they seek in the people they wish to employ. Identifying these skills and comparing them with our current curriculum offer will enable us redesign our curriculum with a view to increasing the employability potential of our learners in the IT industry, especially web design and development and IT support roles.

The questions were categorised in three sections: background and a general understanding of the company profile and work culture; knowledge of qualifications and awareness of vocational qualifications; business needs and the impact of the needs on shaping our curriculum.

Executive summary

Problem statement

In recent times the education industry has seen a lot of changes: Government change, the economic downfall, growing recession and increasing unemployment has affected the industry heavily. Changes in funding and new regulations on eligibility have impacted on training provision.

We can no longer offer a pathways to employment project through which we can support learners into jobs and although our courses have always been adapted to meet industry needs the recent changes mean that we need to review our curriculum to strengthen opportunities for our learners to progress to work or work placements. We wanted to research the possibilities of the QCF and design a curriculum offer that more closely matches the job roles that local employers offer.

Objective statement

- Identify employers and establish links
- Design the questionnaire
- Conduct the survey with employers
- Identify gaps in the curriculum
- Curriculum redesign

Analysis

The research was carried out with seven companies. 42% had 6-10 employees, 14% had less than 50 employees and rest had more than 250 employees. All the companies are well-established, and have been trading for more than 7 years

The IT roles varied based on the type of company and the number of employees. Companies within the IT industry have 70% IT specific roles and companies from non IT industries have 10% IT specific roles. 28% of the companies surveyed were not from the IT industry.

The IT roles that companies listed they required are: First Line IT Support, Trainers, First Line Helpdesk, 2nd- 3rd Line for specialist Server Support, Application Support, Citrix Support, Exchange Support, Backup and Oracle/SQL Support, Network, Web services, Application integration, Network Security, Network Web Services, Application Integration, Database Development, App development Technician, Engineers, First Line Application Support, Server Support, Web Developer, Database Developer, IT Administrator, IT Support

28% of the companies take apprentices. Those that did not take apprentices did not give any reason for not doing so. 28% of the companies take work placement, another 28% mentioned they are looking to take work placements in future. Companies who take work placements do not take apprentices. The reasons for not taking work placement varied from lack of policy to lack of resources.

The applicants skills were mainly assessed using Curriculum Vitaes and interviews. Some organisations said they use additional tests and one mentioned they are happy to use telephone interviews. 57% said they assess candidates based on skills and not qualifications, the rest said they recruit based on qualifications and skills depending on the requirements of the job role. 100% said they want good literacy and presentation skills and other skills depend on the job role.

Findings

100% of those interviewed agreed that people lack skills when applying for job. The skills applicants usually lacked were soft skills related to their field. Employer representatives listed these skills as: personal effectiveness; communication skills; innovation and problem solving skills; customer service skills; management and leadership skills; taking initiative and responsibility; being adaptable; having flexibility and commitment.

The most highly valued skills from the listed skills and attributes were:

Order of importance	Skill	
1st	b)	Self motivation and drive
2nd	a)	Flexibility, adaptability and the capacity to cope with and manage change
3rd	d)	Communication and interpersonal skills
Joint 4th	f) g)	Organisation, planning and prioritisation abilities, and Customer focus and service orientation
5th	h)	Ability to innovate

There was some call for other skills/attributes, e.g:

c)   analytical ability and decision making
i)   mental and physical resilience

In addition, employers expressed a desire for employees to demonstrate an ability to take ownership and responsibility.

The research showed that:
- only 28% of employers are aware of QCF qualifications/vocational qualifications
- 100% feel the qualifications do not fully embrace/accommodate industry needs.
- 100% of those interviewed are happy to employ people with vocational skills but feel there is a gap in the knowledge and skills. Graduates and people with vocational skills both have gaps in their own right. Graduates tend to lack hands-on experience and practical experience whereas vocational recruits lack academic and conceptual knowledge.
- 28% said that it is down to individuals to work on these gaps to make them more employable.
- 48% are unaware of their sector skills council and not aware how these need and gaps can be identified and addressed.
- 48% of those interviewed showed some willingness to take work placements and they all think it is beneficial to support work experience. Work experience brings new energy, innovation and ideas in the company but at the same can be difficult to manage and sometimes companies do not have enough resources to support work experience. Part-time was not suggested suitable for the IT support role, possibly due to the need to provide a consistent level of service (always available) and to avoid disruption if part-time staff have to hand over incomplete jobs to others. However, part-time work placements may be feasible with web industry.

There are few job roles in these companies that are similar to that represented in our current curriculum offer. The curriculum needs to be revised to match the roles completely.

The web roles that are closer to our current curriculum were Web Administrator, Web Designer, Lab Assistant, Tutors, Web Designer and Web Maintenance. In order to completely match these job roles we should embed topics such as web security, php, jquery, javascript and time management in our current provision.

The IT System support roles that the companies offered that are closer to our current curriculum offer are First Line Support, First Line Help Desk Support role and Junior network administrator. In order to completely match these job roles we should embed topics and skills within our curriculum offer such as SQL, Literacy, A+ qualification, MS Office , MS Outlook, Security and databases.
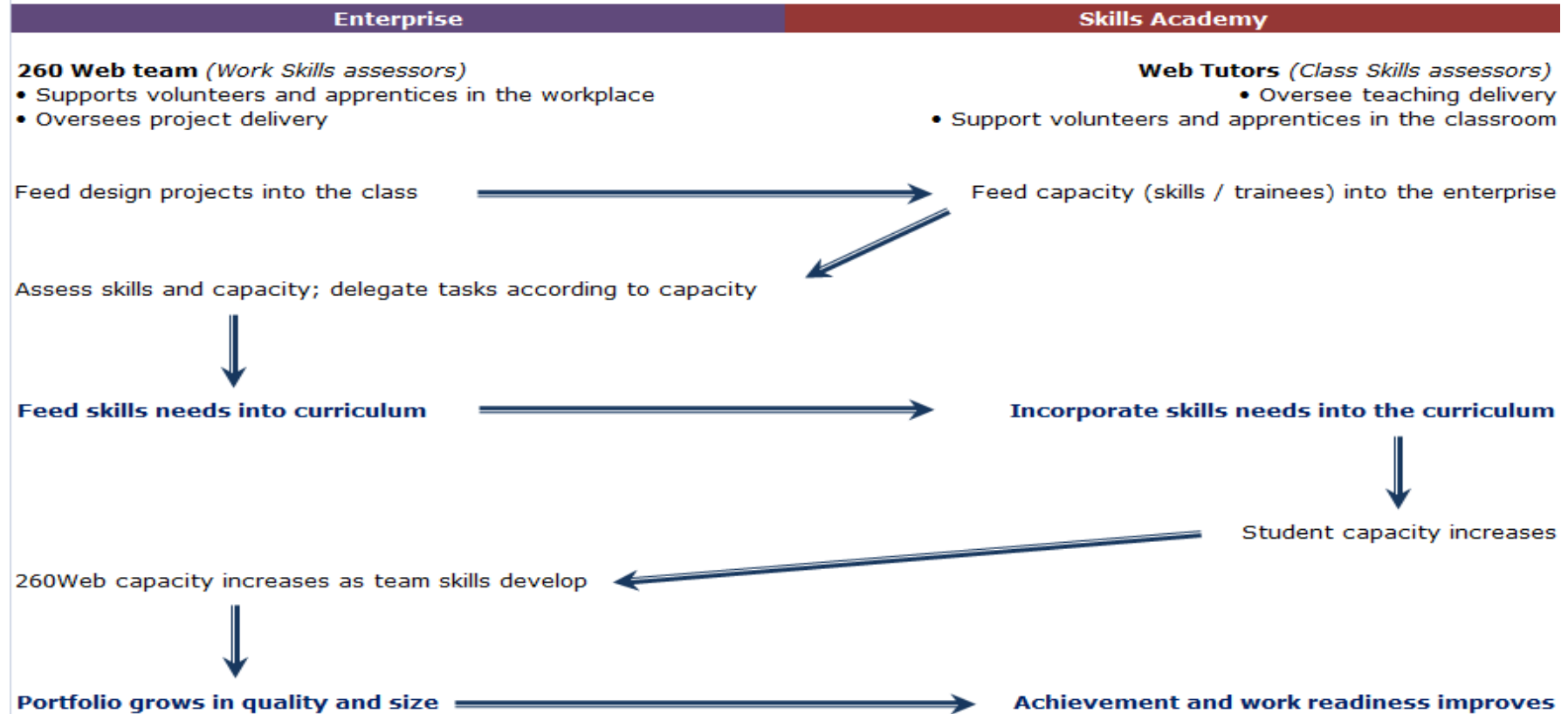
Recommendations
The courses at ELATT are well designed and need only few amendments. The research highlighted the need to embed soft skills and literacy in the courses. The soft skills should be assessed and measured. The soft skills and technical skills that should be included in the revised curriculum offer have been identified above.

Implementation

- We were able to arrange three very practical outcomes. Two career discussions workshops by employers and work placement at Microsoft for 4 learners
- The development of a curriculum road map outlining potential learner progression paths
- Sample Course Outlines
- Sample Scheme of Work
- **Capacity to improve**
  Our research with employers has led us to conclude that:
  - Learners studying to be IT Practitioners should also be good IT users, and be able to use and understand common software applications – as opposed to just being knowledgeable about more technical aspects
  - Delivery of soft skills should be formally delivered and measured in each curriculum area, although we recognise that the exact content may vary on level and the specific job the learner is seeking
  - Employability sessions should be formalised so that they become an essential course component in all curriculum areas
  - The classrooms should be adapted to more closely resemble the working environment and additional emphasis placed on practices such as meeting deadlines and interpreting/meeting client specifications.
  - We have discussed ways of recognising and rewarding additional effort by learners over and above the standard 'pass' grade, for example, a points or reward system for achieving star outcomes, best student, most achievement, most distance travelled, etc
  - "Making Presentations" should be a feature of all courses.
  - Staff training will involve; how to agree measurement, how to implement inclusive delivery, ensuring inter-class interaction.
  - ELATT should consider developing a platform to showcase students work to potential employers.
  - The project has helped us improve our formal Enterprise Model, by which we mean the synergy between our Enterprise Team 260 Web and our classroom delivery. Through the project we have been able to identify a more rigorous process of training, feedback and improvement based on closer working between the tutor and the enterprise staff. The purpose of this model is to provide high quality work experience for learners and allow them to test their skills in a supported employment environment.

- Enterprise Model for our internal company, see below.

ELATT Enterprise Model: 260 Web

The Learning Cycle

Enterprise	Skills Academy

260 Web team *(Work Skills assessors)*
- Supports volunteers and apprentices in the workplace
- Oversees project delivery

Web Tutors *(Class Skills assessors)*
- Oversee teaching delivery
- Support volunteers and apprentices in the classroom

Feed design projects into the class → Feed capacity (skills / trainees) into the enterprise

Assess skills and capacity; delegate tasks according to capacity

Feed skills needs into curriculum → **Incorporate skills needs into the curriculum**

Student capacity increases

260Web capacity increases as team skills develop ←

Portfolio grows in quality and size → **Achievement and work readiness improves**

Suggested tasks

Websites	www.elatt.org.uk	**Social Media**	Youtube site + content
	www.260web.com		Facebook page: development / maintenance
	Private commissions on a needs basis		e-newsletters
Graphics	Leaflet design		
	Advert design		
	Branded merchandise and stationery		

LSIS Curriculum Development Fund - Reinvigorating Curriculum Design ELATT