

Skills and Employer Responsiveness (SER) programme

Employer engagement at Peterborough Regional College



Introduction

Peterborough Regional College has discovered it has the potential to significantly increase and grow its income with its existing resources, as a direct result of support from the Skills and Employer Responsiveness (SER) programme funded by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service.

Philip Young, the College's Director of Employer Engagement, says it sought support from the SER programme because employer engagement was a relatively under-developed part of its operations with an approach that had previously been more scattergun than strategic.

"We wanted to develop a more scientific approach to local intelligence and try to move the college to being a demand-led organisation rather than just doing what we had always done," he says.

"The College has strong vocational industry links in hospitality, health and social care, construction, education, engineering, and leadership and management, but we didn't know what percentage of those markets we were penetrating.

"We wanted to identify those markets in which we didn't have a significant presence and see if there was an opportunity for us if we understood them a little bit more."

The intervention

The college benefited from a series of interventions over six months or so.

Philip and a handful of colleagues on the business development side took part in a webinar and talked through how the LSIS eLMI (electronic labour market information) tool could help them. Registered users of the Excellence Gateway can access the tool at the [SER website](#).

A SER consultant then came into the college for a session in the boardroom with a wider group of people including colleagues in the curriculum area.

There was also a session with external stakeholders and employers; this was very useful because it generated feedback and general recognition that the eLMI tool shouldn't be used in isolation but as one of several intelligence sources that can help confirm a trend or a viewpoint.

What happened as a result of the intervention?

As a direct result of what he learned from the SER programme support, Philip spent the next few months writing the College's employer engagement strategy for 2011–13, which was approved by the senior management team in the spring of 2011.

"This is important because we've never had a clear employer engagement strategy before," he says. "We wanted to gather stronger intelligence of our market penetration and identify market potential for growth aligned to local and regional priorities.

“We included an action plan on using labour market intelligence to formulate employer responsive strategies that enable the college to service employer and sector needs, using the eLMI tool to develop and improve our understanding of the local employment structure and improve our opportunities for engaging employers.

“We put in quite an ambitious target to engage with an extra 300 or so new employers. We were very good at talking to our existing base of about 500 employers but not so good at reaching new ones. We realised the eLMI tool could help us with that.

“We want to exploit whatever the opportunities might be and to move out of our comfort zone and discover where any gap in our knowledge might be.

“We could sell or promote what we’d historically been good at but we had no understanding of the different sectors we were penetrating or what the opportunities or pressures from external competitors might be.”

To address that, the College has made one person responsible for the use and dissemination of eLMI and sharing the information with those who need it.

“So now we’re using market intelligence to try to shape our business development strategies and actions – and we’re sharing it with external organisations including the chamber of commerce and Opportunity Peterborough, an inward investment agency.

“I’m quite keen that we have stronger partnerships with some of the external organisations. They were quite receptive to the fact that we are more open and that we are sharing information and trying to move to being more demand-led.

“We used to turn out apprentices in sectors in which the college was historically strong, but they weren’t necessarily what employers needed.”

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

Philip says the barriers to change are mostly cultural and require people to have the discipline to use eLMI and embrace new attitudes and ways of doing things.

“Nobody is saying we can’t do it or shouldn’t do it, but we have to be more comfortable with using various sources of market intelligence to help us share our strategy going forward.

“This is all about getting used to it. I think it’s going to take two or three years to embed it into our everyday activities.

“The strategy is a living, breathing document that isn’t going to gather dust in a filing tray or the bottom drawer. I have to report on its activities termly, which keeps pressure on me.”

He says there were no direct costs of implementing the changes.

What was the impact?

Although Philip believes it will be a couple of years before the full impact of the SER programme support can be measured, he was thrilled to discover that the college had the potential to do significantly more business with its existing resources.

“If you replicate that across all the curriculum areas it would be a significant increase in income. And we’ll be asking ourselves why we weren’t doing this before.

“We’ve a small pilot project going in the hospitality area so we can get comfortable with it, prove we have a model that works with some quick wins, and get some evidence we can demonstrate.

“Once we have more confidence, we can take it to other parts of the college. We can look at potential markets we can take our hospitality and catering to – local authority schools, independent schools, facility management sites, garden centres, hotels and leisure venues, restaurants, the MoD [Ministry of Defence] and prisons – and we don’t yet do anything for the charity sector.

“We already have a good share of the market, but we’ve never asked ourselves which other markets we can take our products to, where they are, and whether there are any other products we would need to develop to service those markets.

I think we can make some quite significant steps in income growth by having this employer engagement strategy and being more structured and using market intelligence to inform our approach.”

What were the benefits for your organisation?

Philip says the benefits to college staff are typified by the experience of one account manager who had felt directionless since the loss of Train to Gain funding.

“He’s now quite empowered and feels he’s been given direction. He feels quite motivated that there is some structure and direction about what we’re trying to do and the markets we’re trying to penetrate.

“He’s involved in the hospitality pilot and is very receptive. He says if I set him the challenge he’ll go and meet it for me.”

Philip expects the results to be sustainable but first the change will need to be embedded into the culture of the organisation.

“It hasn’t yet, and that’s going to take time. It needs somebody to drive it and at the moment that person is me.

“We want to be less heavily reliant on Government funding by growing our commercial income instead – and one way is to increase the number of employers we work with in a targeted, structured and systematic way.

“We’re going to have to make decisions based on a bit of science and intelligence rather putting our finger in the air and wondering what we think is going to happen.”

What were the measurable results?

The college is developing robust performance measures of income and the number of employers it engages with.

Philip will be producing termly reviews as well as a monthly report to his line manager.

What advice do you have for others?

Philip advises other providers in a similar situation to be ambitious in their thinking but realistic about what they’re able to achieve with existing resources. And he says they shouldn’t use eLMI as their sole source of information but should use it to complement other data they should be gathering.

Key learning points

- Ensure your organisation has a clear and up-to-date employer engagement strategy.
- Review your strategy and progress regularly.
- Make it somebody's job to be responsible for, say, the eLMI tool.
- Use tools to find out how big the potential market is, and what percentage of it you are missing out on.
- Don't rely entirely on eLMI but use it in combination with other tools.
- Base your strategies on facts, not guesswork.
- Share information with external stakeholders, including employers and chambers of commerce.
- Be patient while your colleagues become comfortable with new tools and attitudes.
- Be ambitious, but don't bite off more than you can chew at first.
- Be adventurous. Don't just do what you've always done or feel comfortable with.
- Change doesn't have to be expensive. Sometimes the cost can be negligible.
- In this age of austerity, be wary of relying too heavily on government funding. Diversify if you can.

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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:

