

Case Study

Reaseheath College

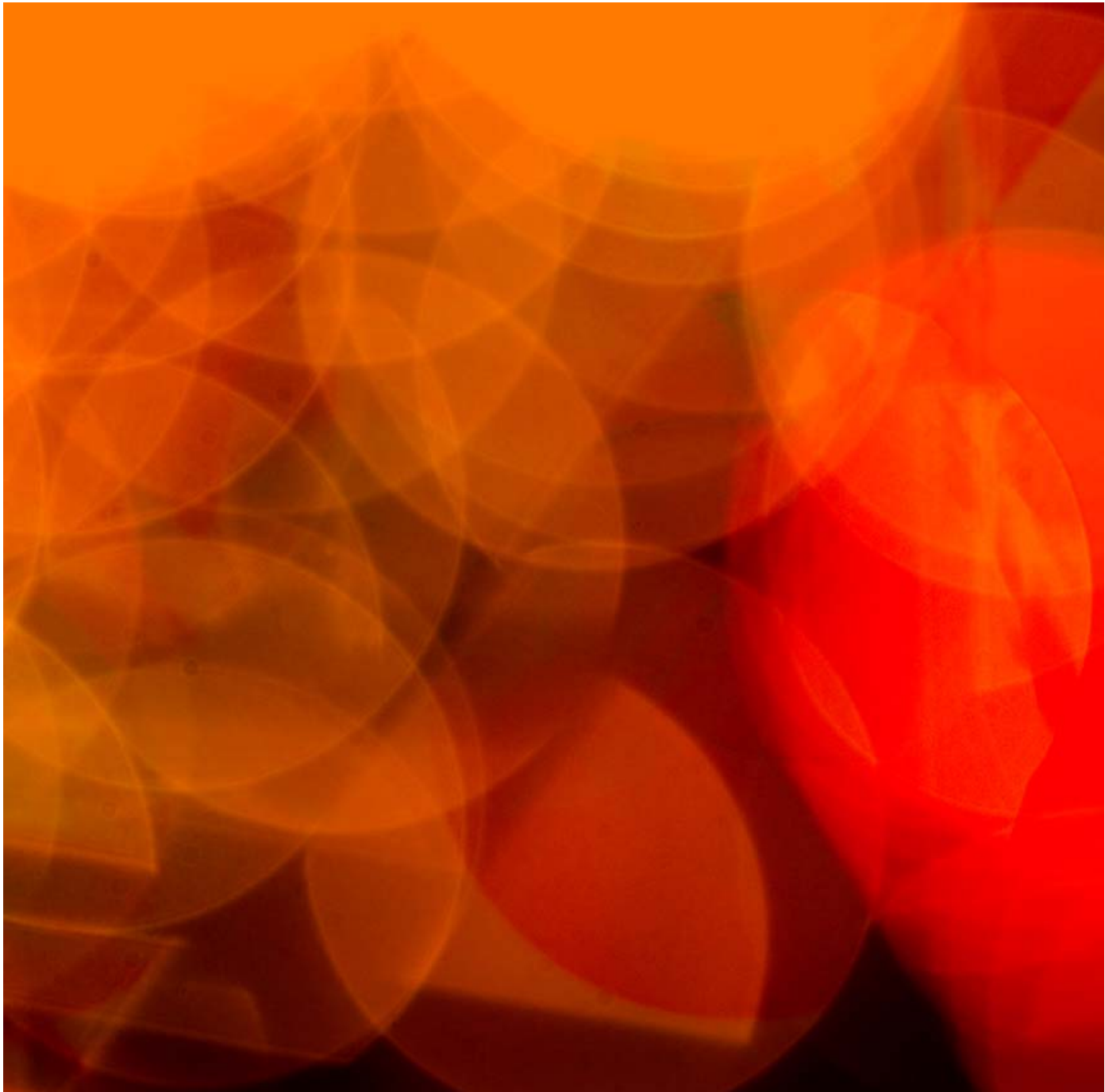
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1. Introduction

The following example shows how the provider dealt with a particular challenge relating to building capacity in offering business innovation support to employers.

In this case the pressure point discussed is:

‘How do we remodel the college as a single, employer facing entity?’

2. Summary

Both Sir Andrew Foster in his 2005 Review of FE Colleges and Lord Sainsbury in his 2007 Review “Race to the Top” were clear that the FE Sector is uniquely positioned to respond to the challenge of increasing the competitiveness of the UK economy.

This paper is a Case Study of Reaseheath College’s attempt to rethink its approach to Employer Engagement and re-engineer its structure and modus operandi in order to help deliver government targets on Competitiveness, Skills, Innovation and Carbon Reductions.

3. Situation & Context

It could be said that the specialist land based colleges have had a head start in the field of Employer Engagement. Twenty first century Reaseheath College sits on the site of the former Cheshire College of Agriculture which dates back to 1922. The College was awarded a clean sweep of “Outstanding Grade 1s” at OFSTED Inspection in 2006 with the award of the Training Quality Standard (TQS), Part A in Employer Responsiveness, just over a year later. Part B, Vocational Excellence in Food Chain Technologies was achieved in November 2008.

At the time of the OFSTED inspection the College already had in place a number of significant national contracts with Employers such as JCB, ‘A’ Plant and the National Trust. These contracts are managed in the curriculum areas, supported by the Apprenticeship Team in Work Based Learning.

In 2006, the ETP – Employer Training Pilot Scheme – was rolled out nationally under the banner of “Train to Gain”. The Work Based Learning Manager became the Train to Gain Manager, within the Directorate of Business Development and Marketing, managing a contract worth about £0.5m per annum. Here the learning is designed around the needs of the workplace and delivered in the workplace, not on Campus.

At the same time, another part of the College, also within Business Development and Marketing, was engaging with businesses. A Rural Enterprise Gateway (REG) had been established in 2005 using funding from Rural Renaissance which was introduced following the outbreak of Foot and Mouth in 2001. A team of Business Advisors went out to rural businesses, especially farms seeking to diversify, helping them develop start-up business plans, plans for growth and submit applications for grant funding for both revenue and capital projects.

In essence, the College was interfacing with employers – with high levels of success, it has to be said. It was apparent, though, that opportunities to add value to Employer Engagement were being lost as a result of fragmentation. Curriculum areas, Business/Workforce Development and REG were all dealing separately with employers.

4. Task or Challenge

The Orchestra

Margaret Bardsley joined the College as Director of Business Development and Marketing in August 2006. Her portfolio was to include; Business Development, Marketing, REG and Facilities. With her background in Workforce Development it was expedient to incorporate skills within the portfolio and this took place in September 2006 when Train to Gain was positioned in the Directorate.

At that time a number of things were happening which influenced the future strategy. In the period prior to the creation of the “New Standard” (which subsequently became TQS), Colleges in the North West were following an existing model of Employer Engagement which had grown up in the South East. LSC funding was made available to the sector which allowed the College to produce a Directory of Employer Facing offers. Reaseheath at the time was going down a traditional route of establishing a physical Business Development Unit to interface with employers. Something about this did not resonate with the College. The notion of a Directory – one size fits all – does not give out a strong message that the College wants to respond to individual business needs.

In parallel, the message coming down from government and indeed from the regions, was about raising UK Competitiveness through Skills Development in line with the Leitch Agenda. Again, something here told us there were opportunities to offer solutions which go beyond “pure skills”. Having had the experience of delivering Enterprise Support through the REG, Reaseheath saw an opportunity to broaden out the offer to employers through a new way of ‘joined up’ working which would bring together Skills and Enterprise (and now Innovation) in one holistic yet customised offer. Using a musical metaphor, this would transform the offer from a series of bands playing their own particular brand of music, to that of an orchestra. Across the College the intention was to work collaboratively with one another in order to deliver outstanding holistic business solutions and offer business innovation services.

A decision was made to bid to deliver this service through an Enterprise Delivery Hub (EDH). The initial approach for funding to the Regional Development Agency, NWDA, went in during the Summer of 2007.

The Barriers

One of the major obstacles to overcome was the fact that funding for the Enterprise element of the work, the REG Project, was due to expire in March 2008. The introduction of the Business Simplification Model within another Government Department BERR – Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform – meant that the existing REG model was no longer fit for purpose. It was deemed likely to replicate the IDB - Information, Diagnostics and Brokerage - model of Business Link, the primary gateway for Business Support. The initial response from the RDA to the proposal for an Enterprise Delivery Hub was a definite “No”.

Not only was there a problem with a possible conflict with the Business Simplification model, which meant there had to be a “market failure” case to deliver Business Support to rural businesses, there was also an initial hiccup in that the project was designed to cut across a number of key agency themes whereas, in the main, projects submitted for approval fall into one key area. Since the project addresses Skills, Enterprise Innovation and Sustainability it meant that everyone had to sit round the table and agree with NWDA who would pay for what. It should be emphasised that whilst this was an initial problem, the Agency staff could not have been more helpful and accommodating.

5. Actions or Approach

The People

In all projects there are forces which propel the idea forward whilst others act as a constraint.

The key sponsors and drivers for the EDH were, in the main, the Principal, Vice Principal and the Director of Business Development and Marketing. Without this vision and buy-in from the beginning, the project would not have got off the ground and certainly the NWDA would not have agreed to invest nearly £5m in our Skills, Enterprise and Innovation Solutions model.

The Reaseheath College Principal, Meredydd David, worked directly with the Secretary of State, Senior Civil Servants from DIUS and Sector colleagues on John Denham’s Think Tank to promote this new way of working. His appetite for this change was critical. Dave Kynaston, the Vice Principal was similarly committed to the vision. Dave managed the curriculum overall and without his buy-in the project would never have got off the ground. The proposition that colleges can and should play a significant role in the national and regional economy through pulling together their resources in order to support businesses

through specialist Skills, Enterprise and Innovation Solutions was developed into a project proposal and submitted to the RDA by the Director of Business Development and Marketing.

There were, at the same time, the cynics and others who found the concept “too big” for comfort. The direction of travel in FE Employer Engagement in 2006/07 was often about “Skills in Isolation”. Staff development tended to focus on “Training or Organisational Needs Analysis” or “Sales Techniques for Train to Gain Staff”, rather than on developing commercial acumen or learning to listen to employers. To some in the organisation, the concept of the EDH was almost heretical. It challenged traditional comfort zones. Those who felt uncomfortable made their own decisions and moved on. The overwhelming majority embraced the challenge of new ways of working and were keen to make the concept work.

In order to familiarise the Reaseheath staff with the concept, a slot was set aside during a whole College Staff Development event to explain the Hub concept and how it would work. The Director and Team put on a “choreographed” display which demonstrated to all staff how this method of working would be delivered and why it would add significant value in terms of Employer Engagement.

Scenario 1 consisted of a series of individual pairs facing each other. This represented Employer Engagement in Colleges which lack a strategic vision for Employer Engagement. Here Employer Engagement undoubtedly takes place but is uncoordinated and lacks direction.

The second scenario was depicted as two rows of individuals standing back to back. This represented a traditional model where there was a Business Development Unit working in isolation from the curriculum. There is a “them” and “us” mentality and opportunities are lost to bring employers into the curriculum planning process in order to help shape the future offer. Furthermore, there were also lost opportunities to create bridges to employers and sectors in order to help businesses bring in new talent which has been moulded to meet their needs.

Finally, the third choreographed scenario was a circle representing a whole College approach. Here all the individuals joined hands facing inwards. In this model it was essential that each component was fully aware of the totality of the internal and external offer. The external offer comprised additional specialists e.g. Food, Marketing or Agricultural Specialists. Without this knowledge businesses would fail to have access to the full range of interventions on offer.

As an example, a business could attend a Sustainability Master Class and meet a representative of Reaseheath Agricultural Development Academy (RADA). They could then access specialist support to help develop business plans, access vocational training, Train to Gain and secure funding through a variety of sources.

6. Results and Learning

Where are we now?

The project launched in April 2008. This Reaseheath Case Study was written as part of the LSIS “Aspiring Pathfinders” Project. The original bid to the FE Specialisation and Innovation Fund in September 2008 was written by the Director of Business Development and Marketing at Reaseheath, Margaret Bardsley, on behalf of LANDEX, the umbrella organisation for all the English Land Based Colleges.

The brief for the original bids was ‘to develop capacity for innovation within the sector’. Six existing projects (including the Reaseheath EDH) were identified – 3 in Food, 3 in Energy and Sustainability. The LANDEX bid was based around using these projects as Action Learning Sets in two ways. Firstly, through extending the membership of the 6 project steering groups to enable other colleges to share in the learning experience. Secondly, through the appointment of a Director of Innovation to Landex, to have in place a resource to pull together the 6 individual learning experiences and to cascade them throughout the network.

The overall project is sustainable since the ambition was to use the life of the Innovation project to convince the LANDEX membership of the value of an increased subscription (less than £5k per College per annum) to support the continuation of the Director of Innovation post in subsequent years. The

amount of NWDA funding to Reaseheath College would probably convince even the most sceptical of the merits of such a small annual investment.

A successful launch event for all stakeholders was held on June 19th 2009. Each stakeholder was sent a piece of a jigsaw as their invitation in order to demonstrate that it is only when you put the individual pieces of the jigsaw together that you can see that all individual stakeholders are part of the project and add value to it.

The College is already starting to see impact on its business and on individuals. For example, they have quickly been able to respond and deliver effectively under the 'response to redundancy' programme. They have had more starts on the programme because they are better able to flex and respond quickly, including during July and August.

As it stands at present, Reaseheath will continue to roll out its project, as will the other 5 partners. To continue the metaphor – the orchestra is seated, the audience is in place. It just needs the conductor to enter the stage and lift the baton

Key points

Harnessing the expertise within the whole college so that a complete offer of Skills, Enterprise, Innovation and Sustainability services can be made to employers; creating an orchestra which works together from individual bands.

Senior Management demonstrating their commitment to gaining key stakeholder support, and communicating their vision of collaborative working to all staff.

Working with the Regional Development Agency to secure a co-ordinated agreement on project funding contributions from different agencies.

7. References

<http://www.reaseheath.ac.uk/>