

York College – Continuous improvement

Case study



About York College

York College is the largest provider of A Level and vocational programmes for 16–19 year olds in the Yorkshire and the Humber region, offering over 40 A Level subjects and 80 vocational programmes. The College also offers a range of higher education courses for full and part-time study as well as many adult learning classes.

York College ranks in the top 10 colleges in the country for its A Level achievement rates and results have been above the national average for 16 consecutive years. Its vocational programmes, including Train to Gain and Apprenticeships, also boast outstanding achievement results that are well above the national average.

The results show that the College is already a high achiever in the delivery of training. The Employer Engagement Quality Assurance Manager believes one of the key reasons for this success is that the College recognises that continuous improvement is essential. They are always looking to identify areas for further development.

Starting point

York College decided to access support from the Skills and Employer Responsiveness Programme (SER) programme through two strands, Employer Responsiveness and Apprenticeships.¹

They recognised that the changing landscape of skills delivery with its increased focus on employers paying for skills provision and the government emphasis on increasing Apprenticeship numbers would bring challenges. The College therefore wanted to ensure it was prepared for future delivery requirements and valued being able to access support from the programme with the identification and implementation of improvements.

The College was assigned two peer mentors, an adviser from Intraining and an adviser from STAR (Training and Consultancy) Ltd, to provide support for their chosen elements.

Intraining visited the College to undertake a diagnostic assessment and develop an action plan. The action plan identified some areas for initial improvement. It also highlighted a need for further research into employers' views and the responsiveness of the College to customer enquiries.

“The College has really valued the support available through the Programme and has found the quality against all of the support elements so far to be excellent.”

Quality assurance manager

¹ This resource was produced for the LSIS Skills and Employer Responsiveness (SER) programme. It was current at April 2011.

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The initial actions were as follows:

- Carry out an employer responsiveness evaluation with current employers to get their feedback on the College's performance. This was done independently by the peer adviser from STAR who focused on Apprenticeship employers.
- Go 'mystery shopping' in the College's customer services and business development teams to identify strengths and areas for development. This was also done by the STAR peer adviser who made several different course enquiries.
- Evaluate the employer journey in relation to the delivery of Apprenticeships with a view to making improvements, creating a more standardised approach and embedding this across all departments. This was supported by Intraining.
- Support the business development team and the delivery teams to take a more proactive approach to new and repeat business generation. This included proactively targeting employers to take up more training by conveying its benefits.

Activity to date

The research and review were done and events were scheduled to ensure the findings and new processes were fully embedded across the College before the Programme ends.

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Quality assurance manager

Members of the business development team, including business advisers and employer engagement support officers, as well as the Employer Engagement Quality Assurance manager, attended the following master classes and peer exchange groups:

- Making Partnerships Work
- Marketing Apprenticeships Effectively
- Apprenticeships Planning for Provision
- Changes and Opportunities for Care Sector Providers
- Effective Planning of Employability Provision.

The feedback from the team that attended the sessions was excellent. The College planned a staff continuing professional development (CPD) event at the end of March for individual members to feed back to all staff what they learnt from the sessions and put forward ideas for sustainable changes.

Outcomes and future action

Some key findings from the survey and 'mystery shopping' activity and ideas for improvements were as follows.

Overall, employers viewed the College's responsiveness as good, with almost 90% of employers stating that they would access further training at the College. However, the information given to employers at the start of the Programme appeared to be inconsistent, with some departments providing more information than others.

As a result the College is considering producing a standard employer guide to be given to all employers at the start of the programme that they can refer to throughout. This could also be used as a sales tool to inform employers about the many services the College offers, to encourage repeat and more diverse business from employers.

The time taken to respond to initial enquiries could be improved on. Although no employers reported that the College was poor in this area, a few did rate the initial enquiry as only

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satisfactory. The College is considering implementing a set timeframe for enquiry responses. All enquiries should be recorded as well as the time taken to respond, to ensure this is being met.

Mystery shopper exercise

The mystery shopper exercise found that the College was excellent at responding where the enquiry involved a planned course, but when it was for something they did not offer (or were not planning), the call was not always followed through. The College needs to ensure that all enquiries are followed up, even if only to convey that the provision is not available.

The College should also give employers guidance on where they could find alternative provision, even if this is just signposting to a course search engine. Customers remember when they have been given good service and it will encourage them to make further enquiries and use the College again in the future.

The mystery shopper also found that in some cases the customer's details were not requested. This means that the College cannot undertake future follow-up, measure their enquiry conversion or target employers who have already shown an interest in courses with new course date information, etc. When details are taken and the employer has shown an interest but not booked they should be followed up to encourage take-up or find out why they have not progressed.

The College recognised that their delivery team need to be more business and sales focused at the diagnostic stage. The assessors build a strong relationship with employers and are therefore the ideal people to recommend further training and manage enquiries for repeat business.

A CPD session for assessors and the delivery team was arranged to develop their business

focus. The session will concentrate on tools and techniques to help them to identify areas for new business, encourage repeat business and increase employer engagement.

The College has a dedicated and effective business development team but with the change in policy to secure further financial contributions from employers it was felt that they would benefit from some new techniques. A CPD session was therefore arranged with all the business advisers, to discuss approaches to increasing employer engagement and employer contributions.

Impact

The College identified areas that can be improved and individuals were provided with tools and useful techniques to do this. They developed relationships with providers that will continue to evolve as a method of sharing effective practice for continuous improvement. Individuals discovered the benefits of continuously evaluating their practices and processes.

The new processes will be fully embedded across the College at the end of March, following the staff CPD event. It is expected to be between six and nine months before the changes are fully embedded and an impact measure can be taken with employers. Specific impacts that the College expects to see as a result of the project include the following:

- increased numbers of employers paying for training;
- increased levels of employer contributions for training;
- more repeat business;
- more new business;
- improved employer satisfaction results;
- more effective delivery of provision in line with employers' needs.

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York College's Employer Engagement Quality Assurance Manager:

"The college has really valued the support available through the Programme and has found the quality against all of the support elements so far to be excellent.

"One of the main benefits of having an external adviser is that we have actually booked time out to evaluate and reflect on our activities, which then obviously leads to the identification of areas for further improvement. Reflection is essential; however, I'm sure most would agree it's difficult to fit it in during the working day. The advisers have been able to provide a fresh outlook to many aspects and the sharing of best practice from their own organisations.

"The programme has been delivered over a short timeframe which has kept us focused; however there is still a lot of activity ongoing. The programme has identified the areas where we need to make changes and the individuals who have received training have already started to implement some of these changes. However, we believe further impact will be seen at our staff development day in March, which is where we will bring all of the staff who have participated together with other staff to disseminate the best practice learnt. From this we will agree and implement the changes college wide, where we hope that they will result in long-term impact."