

Benchmarking for Employer Responsiveness post TQS

Between September 2009 and March 2010 the LSIS World Class Skills programme funded 97 providers to work together on Thematic Development Projects. There were 10 projects, each addressing different aspects of making provision more responsive to employers' needs.

Introduction

This project focused on benchmarking employer responsiveness following the achievement of the Training Quality Standard (TQS). It contains key ideas and learning points from the work on the project theme.

Who is it for?

The report is aimed at individuals or teams who are tasked with improving employer responsiveness. It should be of particular interest to those looking for a structured process or insight on how to approach improvement.

What will you gain from it?

The aim of this report is to share the experiences of the ten participants involved in the project and the good practice that they identified for their organisations. It will offer insight to enable you to review and improve your level of responsiveness through benchmarking.

“The project has been extremely useful at making you think about what benchmarking is and the considerations necessary to make the exercise effective...it has helped us to appreciate how some of the larger organisation's approaches can be adapted within our own environment.”

Jenny Reeves, Jenka Ltd

Project background

TQS is the nationally recognised benchmark for employer responsiveness. It recognises training providers that offer high quality, high impact training solutions to employer customers.

The practices of certificated providers, having been rigorously tested through assessment, offer examples of effective practice for those seeking to improve their work with employers.

The starting point for the project was therefore to use the practice of providers that had achieved Part A of the Standard. Working from the TQS Framework, the project identified critical areas in which benchmarking would add value, and also identified and tested approaches for benchmarking.

Aims

The participants were particularly interested in identifying effective practice in relation to increasing satisfaction levels and measuring the impact of training for their employers. The project aimed to assist them to:

- understand the key elements of benchmarking
- share good practice in key areas of understanding and meeting employers' business needs
- implement good practice to improve performance; and
- develop guidance that others could use to support any benchmarking activities.

Participants

The participants were a mix of further education (FE) colleges and independent training providers (ITPs). They included both large/complex and small/simple business models. The providers (with key contacts named in brackets) who collaborated on this project were:

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(Contact details correct at March 2010)

“When collecting employer satisfaction data it is important to be clear what you want the survey for – is it just the TQS assessment or for your own performance management?”

Alec Fenn, Patrick Tucker & Tim Strickland

Activity

The focus of this project was to have a common benchmarking output across all the participants, rather than each provider tackling individual projects.

In the initial workshop, the key processes which drive impact and satisfaction were identified. Due to the complexity and length of this list, it was prioritised into four key process elements and one measurement element. The participants divided into five teams to address these. Each followed these steps:

Figure 1: Step-by-step approach followed for identifying effective practice examples



Source: KPMG LLP (UK)

The five elements considered and the practices that they reviewed and shared were as follows:

- **Understanding business needs** – reviewing different approaches to the organisational needs analysis and designing a new “change needs analysis” process and paperwork.
- **Developing proposals** – evaluating how project participants developed training proposals for employers and determining the key steps to include in the process.
- **Quality of delivery** – analysing approaches through all phases of delivery. This included briefing all delivery staff and the employer prior to training; initial assessment; employer and learner inductions; as well as review and feedback during the training delivery. Effective practice was identified for each of these activities.
- **Evaluation of impact** – identifying how the achievement of the previously agreed business needs is reviewed; how success is measured; and how follow-up actions are identified if needs have not been met.
- **Measurement techniques** – comparing the detailed content of different surveys to identify and develop a valid basis for comparison.

Challenges

A number of challenges were encountered during the project.

- Confusing benchmarking with benchmarks: benchmarking is a managed learning process whereas benchmarks enable comparison through defined measures.
- Ensuring that everyone involved had a common understanding of the scope of the benchmarking activity, particularly the boundaries.
- Not having a clearly defined approach to research and comparison with others. This initially made it difficult to identify leading practice.
- Ensuring that each provider identified their own strengths first, many of which could be found in their TQS feedback report, before looking for effective practice in others.
- Being clear on how improvement opportunities were identified and selected – different does not equal better.
- Comparing like with like when considering performance data (in terms of questions, survey coverage etc.).
- Recognising the need to invest time in benchmarking. It is not just about exchanging documents, there is a need to meet and discuss how they are used.

Impact

Whilst it is too soon to identify impact, the following points indicate some of the benefits seen by the participants:

Understanding business needs

- Establishment of a cross-college strategic panel to oversee employer responsiveness.
- The introduction of a new “change needs analysis” process and documentation.
- Introduction of a competency framework and training programme for staff involved in understanding employers’ business needs.

Proposals

- An outline process was designed, with defined steps for structuring a final proposal for training.

Delivery

- Participants outlined key responsibilities for the employer, learner and provider, at all stages of delivery.

Surveying employers

- Participants now have a number of questions in common, such as ‘Did the time and location of training match your needs?’ The responses can then be matched between them and used to compare performance.

Evaluating impact

- To ensure that the correct information is gathered, new paperwork was designed and piloted with four employers.

Benchmarking customer satisfaction

FE Sussex, Westminster Kingsway College and City of Bristol College

These participants carried out detailed analysis of their current surveys, questions and methods of assessing customer satisfaction.

Initially they compared survey questions and found that 50% could be partly or fully matched, so comparing these questions offered meaningful benchmarking data. They then compared the results of the surveys in these areas to establish how each participant was performing against the peer group trends. They also identified common areas of high performance, such as proposing an appropriate solution to meet employer needs, and lower performance such as responding quickly to enquiries.

Participants highlighted elements of good practice from the data analysis. They identified the following key elements to consider when creating an effective survey:

- type of survey – employer satisfaction or impact, or both;
- frequency of survey;
- core questions (could be linked to TQS indicators);
- categorisation of questions, e.g. pre-delivery, delivery, impact;
- survey methods e.g. electronic, face-to-face.

The three participants were able to compare measurement of employer satisfaction and invited the other participating organisations to share their data. All providers have therefore been able to use the performance comparisons to focus their improvement activities.

Top tips

Benchmarking compares critical areas of activity to identify good practice, gaps and potential areas for improvements in performance. It is not a panacea to cure all organisational problems, to catch up with competition or to reduce costs. It is critical to define what you want to explore and why so that you may implement findings.

Understanding needs

- Each employer visit should be based on an appropriate level of planning and research. The selection and training of the individuals making the visits are vital.
- You need to decide on the competencies required for business development staff, particularly in relation to sales, business advice, consultancy and staff development.

Proposals

- Proposals must be uncomplicated, transparent and fit for purpose. They should be relevant to the client, in simple language and include all the details to make it a working document for all parties.
- On completion of the training activity the proposal can be used (in conjunction with other documentation) to explore customer satisfaction, impact measurement and further training opportunities.

Delivery

- Ensure a standardised approach towards delivery methods, styles, customisation and assessment strategy, but build in as much flexibility as possible.
- Ensure regular progress reviews are scheduled. Identify and define milestones, clarity of responsibility and actions to address issues.

Evaluation

- Ensure you are clear on how you intend to use impact data for improvement before defining the data you want to measure.
- Carry out a review at a time agreed with the employer. Ideally, agree the timescale at the point of identifying business needs.

Measurement

- Be clear on how you will use the data. Ensure your methods produce sufficiently high quality data to enable you to make your intended changes.
- Ensure the targets/benchmarks align with your aims and objectives as defined in your strategy.

What's next for you?

Based on the learning from this project there are a number of key steps which will help you maximise the opportunities to be gained from benchmarking.

Checklist

- Have you defined the areas of performance you want to improve and scoped the processes within them?
- Do you know what level of improvement you are looking for (incremental or radical)?
- Do you know your own current performance (particularly strengths)?
- Are you clear how you will judge good practice?
- Have you identified appropriate organisations with whom to benchmark?
- Of your findings, have you identified which ideas you wish to adopt?
- What process will you use to introduce the innovations to your organisation?
- Have you developed a means for monitoring and reviewing your required performance improvement?

Get in touch

For more information on the WCS programme, please go to www.excellencegateway.org.uk/wcs

“Working in partnership with Newbury College this project allowed Basingstoke College of Technology to examine objectively its practice and procedures for working with employers against the different practices of other flagship TQS providers across England.”

Alan Gwyer, Basingstoke College of Technology and
Bill Orson, Newbury College