

# Tower Hamlets College



## Background

The Business and Enterprise Directorate at Tower Hamlets College has a strong track record of providing employer solutions to local businesses. With over two hundred small and medium enterprises (SMEs) on its books, THC Employer Services provides a substantial range of short and long courses for delivery either in the workplace or within the college's dedicated training centres. Along with the rest of the sector, Shamsol Hoque, Head of Employment Solutions, is responsible for finding new market opportunities in a complex and changing environment where funding cuts have had an impact on both providers and employers. The growth of the college's business is most likely to be successful where the wider college is prepared to rise to the challenge and look at innovative and flexible solutions.

Two fundamental changes have major implications for employer services:

- the adult funding budget that is tied to “into work” targets means that colleges have to ensure their provision delivers job outcomes; and
- welfare benefit changes, such as the migration of many former Incapacity Benefit claimants to Job Seekers Allowance, means fewer learners are able to access “free” training but more candidates are available for employability training.

The borough of Tower Hamlets has one of the highest deprivation factors in England. Tower Hamlets College is committed to developing prosperity within the local community by helping people gain the skills to find sustainable employment. As such, the college has always enjoyed a positive relationship with the local Jobcentre Plus, and in light of changes to benefits and funding Shamsol wanted to strengthen relationships with Jobcentre Plus and other agencies to help local people to find jobs. He was keen to involve the wider college in this initiative in order to maximise help to the local community.

## The intervention

Whilst the core business development staff understood the aforementioned issues, Shamsol needed mainstream curriculum colleagues to appreciate what it means to be “employer responsive” in the current climate:

“It's quite simple. If you go to any local retail outlet and their service is inferior you won't go back. So how can we make sure our service is superior and people will come back for more?”

If what employers want is a quality flexible service, colleges must change the way in which they operate. This can be illustrated simply by looking at the scheduling of services. From a delivery

point of view, colleges traditionally run from September to June and many teachers work to an academic calendar. Not only does this mean there are two months of lost opportunities but , as Shamsol puts it, “that’s two months of your income gone,” it also reinforces the view that colleges are not responsive to employer needs because they are not open for business for a substantial part of the year. Employer Services were therefore keen to move to all year round provision. “We run 51 weeks of the year and July and August are our busiest periods,” Shamsol explained. “If you’re smart, you can do four months’ worth of work in two months.”

Shamsol felt the key messages about employer responsiveness would be best delivered by industry experts and specialists who could identify opportunities for growth and identify the potential offered via the finer detail of recent funding changes. LSIS, through its Pre-employment and Employer Responsive strand programmes provided the means to sow the seeds for change. First, members of the college management team participated in a workshop which included a presentation on the current funding climate. This was followed by a series of smaller funding workshops for groups of curriculum staff. Between October 2010 and February 2011 around 50 college employees attended at least one of the LSIS workshops.

The messages given in the workshops were clear and uncompromising and some of the facts gave staff food for thought– a reduction in adult funding would be likely to affect jobs at the college. That said, Shamsol felt that people came away from the sessions knowing that there were still funding opportunities to explore. Major growth areas were flagged as apprenticeships and employability training; the direction of travel was clear.



**Shamsol Hoque (centre)**

### **What happened as a result of the intervention?**

Having heard it “straight from the horse’s mouth”, curriculum staff have responded positively to calls to work more flexibly in order to facilitate all year round provision and college leaders have restructured the timetable to allow for summer working. They are also increasing the number of “short, sharp” courses delivered over the summer months as well as throughout the year. On August 1<sup>st</sup> this year, for the first time, visitors to the college can expect to see JCP advisors based at the college alongside front life staff, offering initial advice and guidance about a suite of new programmes. Gearing up for such a big change is always challenging but Shamsol is confident they will be ready on time.

## What was the impact?

Shamsol believes a cultural shift has taken place at Tower Hamlets College, meaning that employer responsiveness is central to college work. The LSIS programmes played a key role in this change because they brought staff directly into contact with the agencies setting the agenda and driving through the changes. Now with a whole college approach to business development, there is a better understanding of the need for unitised courses and full cost provision. For teachers who have spent years focusing firmly on retention and achievement, it is somewhat counter-intuitive to think that a job is not always or solely dependent on passing a qualification, but they are beginning to appreciate the need to factor employment outcomes into their work. Indeed, the college ran an FE innovation project in 2010 to train curriculum staff to become consultants for the college because “teachers know their courses better than anyone else.” Now Shamsol wants to evaluate how successful this has been in moving the college forward. Ultimately, when it comes to progress, Shamsol believes the figures speak for themselves:

“The measure of whether our work is good or not is that our employer focussed provision is growing by 5-10% each year. We predict that this will continue in 2011/12.”

## Key Learning Tips

- Recognise that the academic year is not the only timeframe you work with – it is of little consequence to employers working all year around.
- Make hay while the sun shines – think of the additional income you will generate if you maximise your work output during July and August.
- Work collaboratively with strategic partners such as Job Centre plus to identify new opportunities to get people back into work.

## Contact Details

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