inside EVIDENCE

ie

Successful employer engagement: how can research evidence help?

ANALYSIS

We know how change works in theory – be clear about goals and what success would look like, work out strategies for getting there and put them into practice. All well and good but where do we start?

Evidence from research can be useful in refining goals and identifying success criteria in highlighting what works, where and when. It can crystallise important details of effective actions and behaviours and help to explain why things work so that practitioners can adapt them for other contexts. Research can also reveal the specifics of things to avoid!

In this issue of *Inside Evidence*, we look at a range of research studies that help throw more light on effective employer engagement – and help promote effective learning for employees too.

The study in our first article explores the keys to successful relationships, especially, according to employers, communication – for example, something as simple as having a named person at the end of

the phone helped. Trainees agreed with employers that what they needed was to be able to discuss their respective needs and have feedback on progress being made.

Evidence from lecturers in the hospitality sector reinforces and adds detail to this study's findings. Training providers in this sector also recognised that what's needed is good partnership working, including building relationships and effective communication.

Other studies highlighted in this bulletin look at how to make our teaching more effective. Why do external inspectors think so highly of provision in Creative, Arts and Media, for example? And how could we better meet the specific needs of adults with learning difficulties? Finally, we look at research into how providers can support employers to become more involved in training and the benefits this can bring.

Together with the research findings, we offer some suggestions for how you might put the evidence to work and places where you can find out more.

To find out about factors that affect apprenticeship completion, see the Apprenticeships feature on pages 10–11 of *Quality Improvement*

What does employer engagement mean for quality improvement in practice?

Research reviewed in this issue

1 Is having a good communications system one way to achieve effective employer engagement?

2 Hospitality students are "worse than they used to be". What's the problem?

3 How can we encourage and support training for rural businesses?

4 Brushing up on your teaching skills. What are the ingredients of effective classroom practice?

5 How could we change our teaching to meet the needs of adults with learning difficulties?

WHAT'S THE EVIDENCE?

All the research we feature on these pages is carefully appraised using a specially designed instrument. This helps us to ensure that the findings are trustworthy, relevant and useable across different contexts. You will find details of the evidence sources on each page. Let us know if you'd like more information about the appraisal process by emailing us at: **inside.evidence@qia.org.uk**

MEETING EMPLOYER EXPECTATIONS

IS A GOOD COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM PART OF THE SOLUTION?

Employers placed high value on:
- **relevance**
- **flexibility in location, duration, teaching and assessment**
- **good communication, including a regular and reliable point of contact**
- **high-quality training provided by staff who had a good knowledge of the skills required by the trainees**
- **support for learners**
- **regular feedback on trainees' progress**
- **consultation with the employers about their needs**
- **providers' awareness of the current and future needs of their industry.**

Providers have plenty to say about employers as we know from the feature on Page 2 of this journal. But what do employers think about providers? One recent study found that, while employers were generally satisfied with the services they received, they still felt that there was scope for improvement. So what was important to these employers?

Simply having a point of contact at the other end of the telephone or email was a common response. All employers expected trainers to have a reliable communication system. They wanted prompt responses to queries and to be able to discuss their training needs as well as to receive feedback on trainees' progress.

Some employers complained about a lack of communication – for example, that getting hold of the right person wasn't always easy, even when a designated contact had been provided. They commented how difficulties were sometimes caused by poor telephone systems, where too few staff were on reception to answer the phone, or they hadn't been given the extension number. Some employers complained that they hadn't been given regular feedback on trainees' progress or attendance. One said: 'We only receive invoices'.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, relevance was at the top of the list for most. Employers expected the college service to be linked to workplace practices, to be up to date and reflect the changing needs of the sector and employees. Employers commented that some training providers were offering courses they thought should be provided rather than those that employers and their employees actually needed. For example, employers in the construction industry noted some resistance to providing training related to new processes, such as 'thin bed jointing'. In some cases, the training that was being offered was out of date, such as training in lead work, which is no longer commonly used.

Almost half of the employers stressed the need for flexibility – of delivery times, modes of provision and assessment. Being flexible meant, for example, being prepared to cut training time to the minimum to achieve only the objectives the employer required. Some wanted 'bite-size' training that fitted into the employers' tight schedules and was tailored to the specific needs of their market. Others expected the ability to respond to a company's spasmodic requirements for training.

One third of the employers stressed the need for high-quality training. They saw this as depending on trainers having a good knowledge of their subjects, being up to date with current thinking, using clear, jargon-free language and giving relevant examples and illustrations. They

✂ TAKE ACTION

If you are a manager, trainer or teacher, could you:
- get together with other providers in your area and commission an independent survey of your employers to find out what they think of the service?
- be more proactive in contacting employers and make it easier for regular communication between you to happen, for example, through mobile phones and email?
- do more to consult your employers about their trainees' needs so that you can match their requirements with a more bespoke service?
- work with employees to ensure you are up to date with the latest developments in the industry; for example, through gaining current industrial experience?

MEETING TRAINEE EXPECTATIONS

The researchers approached 118 employers whose employees received training from 18 FE colleges to explore their needs and expectations.

They also spoke to the employees. Their perspective was very similar, it seems. Trainees wanted:

- good communication
- good-quality teaching and relevant content
- flexible delivery, assessment and qualifications, with minimum disruption to their work patterns
- regular and frequent updates and feedback on training and development.

Trainees needed to have someone with whom they could talk and discuss their problems; someone who would answer their queries promptly, who understood their situation and the competing demands on their time.

Trainees also liked being able to gather evidence of their skills from their everyday work. They liked assignments that were directly relevant or specific to their company's work. It was important to them that training and assessment caused them the minimum of disruption: 'Teaching and assessment have to fit in with peaks in our workload'.

Trainees wanted to have regular and frequent updates and feedback on their training and development too – they wanted to know where they needed to improve and where they were doing well. At best, college staff kept them and their employers well informed of their progress but in other cases learners found they had to ask teachers for feedback.

also expected trainers to show a passion for their business and transmit their enthusiasm to the trainees. Employers felt that some courses, especially those offered for the first time, weren't sufficiently organised.

Employers saw good trainers as those who gave support to their learners – trainers who listened to their trainees and discussed their difficulties, offered advice and guidance and boosted their confidence. Those in the care and hair and beauty sectors, in particular, pointed out the importance of their trainees receiving such support, as many had not enjoyed success at school, lacked confidence and had low self-esteem.

It was important to employers that they were kept up to date with national issues and developments. Those in the care sector, in particular, noted how the skills and needs of their staff were changing and developing, especially with new areas of work, such as care for highly dependent clients. A few employers noticed the large variation in customer service, even between individual college departments. For example, while one department had helped the employer through the maze of government requirements, regulations and funding, another department had not.

Finally, employers across all sectors agreed that providers should engage in more detailed discussion and consultation with them before and during training. Many employers said they wanted to be more involved in training and in developing the trainers to help them keep up to date. They also wanted to be involved in developing the curriculum and training programmes that met their specific needs.

Evidence source
Hughes, M. & Smeaton, B. (2007) 'Exploring Employers' Perceptions of Employer Engagement'. Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA)

HOSPITALITY STUDENTS 'WORSE THAN THEY USED TO BE'

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM AND WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

If there's one thing that both providers and employers in the hospitality sector agree on, it's the calibre of students entering the industry. Employers frequently complain about the lack of work ethic and negative attitudes of young people entering the trade. Around 40 per cent of providers also believe that the calibre of the students they teach is lower than 10 years ago.

What providers and employers don't agree about is why. Employers may complain about providers not responding to their needs and their tendency to recruit disinterested students onto courses, use of out-of-date teaching practices and non-realistic working environments. Providers criticise employers for expecting too much of new recruits and for using work experience students as 'cheap labour', thereby turning students off before they've started. While these are polarised views, they do show some of the difficulties faced on both sides.

But there are areas of good practice, where provision is meeting employers' needs and where learners enter the industry with good knowledge, skills and attitudes. What makes provision work well in these cases? According to the lecturers in a recent study, things improved when they:

- forged relationships with employers and allowed them to tweak courses to their needs or develop new bespoke courses
- took time to understand employers' businesses and needs
- gained current experience in the industry and used the opportunity to build commitment from employers
- updated their equipment to create realistic working environments, so they could deliver the skills that employers wanted (for example, through approaching suppliers about donating equipment or buying equipment jointly with employers).

Obviously, partnership working of this kind takes time to establish, but the view from providers is that it's worth persevering. Providers who work together with employers to address needs and solve problems are more likely to produce employees who not only do the work but provide excellent customer service too.

Evidence source
Lowings, A. (2006) 'It Never Used to Be Like This: An analysis of the views of college lecturers'. People 1st, www.people1st.co.uk/research

HOW CAN WE ENCOURAGE AND SUPPORT TRAINING FOR RURAL BUSINESSES?

ANALYSIS

Running a business in a rural area is problematic when it comes to training. The majority of such businesses are small (with fewer than 10 employees or family-run with no employed staff) and are often off the beaten track. This creates specific barriers to the uptake of training, such as distance and finding cover for time off. Recent research found that while most rural businesses saw the need for training and development, they didn't tend to include it as part of a long-term business strategy. So how can training providers get rural businesses on board?

The study identified a number of ways of boosting participation by rural businesses. These included:

- tailoring content and delivery to meet rural business needs – for example, contextualising e-learning (such as training in spreadsheets) to meet the needs of dairy farmers and making the support of e-tutors available
- making the benefits of training clearly visible through case studies and real life scenarios that are relevant to rural businesses and that show the tangible benefits (such as reducing wastage of time and resources)
- making such case study examples known to businesses through word of mouth and trade specific publications.

Rural businesses found 'training groups' (groups of employers in a specific area, which meet regularly) the best way to access training. They enabled businesses to share best practice and resources, and to come together socially. The study suggested that providers would do well to recognise such groups and make links to them through promoting skills and business development opportunities.

Evidence source
Lantra (2005). Report on the use of training groups to promote the uptake of learning in rural communities. www.lantra.co.uk/publications/documents/LantraTrainingGroupsreport.pdf

BRUSHING UP ON TEACHING SKILLS

WHAT ARE THE INGREDIENTS OF EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM PRACTICE?

Creative, Arts and Media provision is consistently rated more highly than other programmes by the inspectorates in terms of learner progression, meeting of individual needs and equality of opportunity. It also attracts a large number of learners. According to the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), approximately 480,000 learners were enrolled on LSC-funded courses in Arts, Media and Publishing in Further Education, Adult and Community Learning and Work-Based Learning in England in 2005/06. According to the last ALI Chief Inspector's Annual Report 'Arts (before adult inspection responsibilities moved to Ofsted), media and publishing' is one of the largest and most popular areas of learning in adult and community learning.

What helps to make CAM providers so successful?

	CHARACTERISTICS OF WEAK CLASSROOM PRACTICE	CHARACTERISTICS OF OUTSTANDING CLASSROOM PRACTICE
Classroom management	When classroom management was poor: •disruptive or inattentive students were not dealt with effectively •teaching and learning at the beginning of lessons were often disrupted due to poor punctuality •practitioners frequently talked too much and did little to combat learners' passivity.	Classroom management was rarely an issue where practitioners adopted a more imaginative and rigorous approach to teaching. For example, in a graphic design lesson, students were introduced to industry buzzwords, which encouraged wider thinking and high-level debate about moral content and ethics relating to graphic design. The pace of lessons was demanding and topics were challenging.
Differentiation in teaching	Lack of differentiation reduced participation among learners. This took the form of disengagement, poor punctuality and reduced attendance levels.	Teaching was less directive and tailored much more to learners' needs. Lessons were well planned with differentiated activities that allowed the most able students to achieve at the highest standard and supported the less able students to achieve well.
Expectations and motivation	Mismatched expectations and de-motivated learners appeared to be common. When expectations were low, the work set was too directive. The focus was often on technique at the expense of expression, which resulted in students producing dull work that lacked individual creativity.	Practitioners were much more likely to encourage a culture of high expectations, agree challenging target grades with students and vary methods, approaches and materials to encourage independent learning.
Key skills	Providers sometimes failed to teach key skills adequately and/or to embed them. Key skills were not integrated into assignments and teachers lacked the knowledge of key skills assessment to be able to support students effectively.	Reports on outstanding providers rarely highlighted key skills as an issue, but when mentioned they were seen as well integrated into the vocational curriculum.
Feedback	Poor feedback was common. Constructive, firm guidance to ensure students complete work on time and understand how to improve was not provided effectively.	Feedback in outstanding providers was more detailed and frequent, made targets clearer and reduced learners' fear of formal assessment.

TAKE ACTION

Could you:
■ use these characteristics to construct a series of observation schedules?
■ work with a colleague to observe each other's teaching sessions, using the schedules as a guide?
■ share and reflect on your findings, and decide on an area you'd both like to improve on?

Evidence source
University of Wolverhampton, School of Education and Desq Ltd (2007). QIA National Teaching and Learning Change Programme (Phase Four) Creative, Arts and Media (Final research paper)

HOW COULD WE CHANGE OUR TEACHING METHODS...

...TO MEET THE NEEDS OF ADULTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES?

The focus of post-16 policy is increasingly shifting towards how students learn. But a recent research review found that a similar shift in focus is not happening where adults with learning difficulties are concerned. What changes do we need to make?

Among other things, studies in the review showed the importance of how important it is to target communication skills, particularly for learners with profound and complex learning difficulties. They suggest that teachers need to be more aware of the range of ways through which learners may communicate, eg. through gesture and facial expression.

There was evidence too that activities such as storytelling helped people with learning difficulties to learn more about themselves and increase their ability to express themselves. For example, one study showed that belonging to a storytelling circle improved the social and emotional wellbeing of the learners as well as engaging them in a meaningful activity.

The review also suggested that:
- where the learning takes place is as important as what is being learned. Teachers should help learners to make connections between formal (college or work) and informal settings (home, community) to help them transfer and generalise skills
- making learners active participants increases their social and emotional wellbeing

- ICT and multimedia should be central in supporting learning and social inclusion rather than being seen as a useful, but peripheral, tool.

Evidence source
Dee, L., Devecchi, C., Brian, L., and Cochrane, S. (2006) 'Being, Having and Doing: Theories of learning and adults with learning difficulties'. Learning and Skills Research Report, www.lsrc.ac.uk/publications/index.asp

TAKE ACTION

Could you:
- ask adults with learning difficulties to tell you 'the story' of their most successful learning experience and unpack with them what made it work?
- use what you find out to review what and how you teach them?

INSIDE TRACK

COMING SOON

Two new QIA-funded research projects
One (from the Learning Skills Network) aims to find out what existing research studies can tell us about effective provider practice in employer engagement and will report early in 2008. A second (by the Confederation of British Industry) will illustrate effective practice from the employers' perspective and will report in September.

FIND OUT MORE

A project by emskills set out to find the 'magic ingredients' in successful employer engagement. The criteria they found are embodied in the new National Standard. The report is illustrated by a variety of case studies from the East Midlands: www.emfec.co.uk/uploads/Good_Practice_Guide.pdf

HAVE YOUR SAY

Have you found any of our articles useful? What could we do better? What information would you like to see printed here? Please take five minutes to complete our short online survey at www.curee.co.uk. The survey closes on 31 March.