

# Review of Evidence

Research



**Meeting Employers' Needs**

# Introduction

This review is an updated version, commissioned by LSIS, of part of a research project originally commissioned by the QIA. The project aimed to support QIA in adopting an evidence-based approach to the development of programmes and materials to support improvement in the post-16 system, and to ensure that future research, development and practice are based on awareness and understanding of the issues facing the further education system.

This review is one of a series which are intended to be useful to managers, practitioners and others working in the learning and skills sector. A thematic review was undertaken of current and recent research findings, relevant materials and resources. Items were selected that inform and support improvement.

Section one contains the key messages for improvement that emerge from the materials identified by the review. Section two contains a catalogue of those materials from which these messages have been drawn.

One of a series of reviews of evidence commissioned by LSIS in 2009. Produced by NIACE on behalf of LSIS  
**All the links in this document were checked in October 2010.**

# Section 1

## Summary of Key Messages for Improvement

### Improvement Messages for Providers

A description of the policy context for this theme follows the summary of key improvement messages. The numbers in brackets refer to items in the catalogue of materials containing improvement messages in relation to this theme, also created as part of the project, and which is contained in section 2 of this review.

#### For strategic and operational managers

- Employers require from providers and from the system:
  - clear and non-conflicting policies on skills (16, 17);
  - an emphasis on how training will benefit their own business (16, 9, 12, 15, 28, 5, 4, 19, 6, 21, 27, 17);
  - support for business development (11, 13, 15, 19, 27, 17);
  - financial and other incentives to train (19, 11, 16, 13, 21);
  - dedicated access points (14, 10, 16, 30, 5, 19, 17);
  - effective information and advice on skills development for both the business and individual employees (1, 11, 13, 30, 20, 4, 21, 18, 17);
  - flexibility in where, when, how and what training is delivered (6, 10, 15, 16, 24, 30, 20, 5, 19, 21, 17);
  - straightforward administrative procedures with a minimum of bureaucracy (16, 13, 15, 30, 5, 19, 21).
- Providers should recognise the scale of change needed to respond to employers' requirements and the policy drivers. In many cases this will require changes to mission, and an end-to-end review of provision, based on criteria for effectively meeting employers' needs, to identify the extent of responsiveness and areas for improvement. Providers need to:
  - develop a corporate approach to employer responsiveness, and an organisation-wide commitment to employers as customers (1, 10, 16, 8, 30, 20, 5, 19, 24, 6, 23, 17);
  - provide a rapid and effective response to employers' queries and training needs (14, 13, 28, 5, 19, 18, 17);
  - generate demand from employers for skills development (including full cost recovery services) through proactive marketing and relationship management systems (14, 11, 16, 8, 13, 28, 5, 4, 19, 6, 27, 17);
  - understand current and potential skills needs in their local area, drawing on formal and informal sources of labour market information (1, 14, 16, 13, 28, 5, 4, 19, 6, 2, 24, 3, 18);

- develop and continually review products and services which are relevant to employers' skills needs and involve employers in this process (11, 14, 10, 16, 13, 12, 26, 28, 20, 5, 19, 6, 23, 17);
- deliver training flexibly, often at or near the workplace, with minimum disruption to work patterns (14, 16, 8, 13, 12, 15, 20, 5, 19, 21, 24, 3, 27, 17);
- provide skills development which adds value for both employers and individuals (14, 16, 26, 20, 5, 4, 19, 6, 21, 18, 17);
- work in partnership with other agencies and providers supporting skills development (11, 14, 16, 12, 26, 28, 20, 4, 6, 18, 23, 17);
- support employer networks, especially for small and medium sized enterprises SMEs (11, 26, 28, 5, 19, 6);
- develop excellence and state of the art expertise, ensuring that staff are up to date (1, 11, 14, 10, 16, 13, 20, 5, 19, 6, 17);
- develop service standards and quality assurance methods for work with employers (14, 25, 22, 20, 5, 19, 18, 17).

## The Policy Context

The Government has consistently made skills development a priority since 1997 and a series of white papers have proposed policies and measures to develop the UK's skills base. The rationale given for these policy imperatives is that skills development helps individuals, employers and the economy to be prosperous which in turn increases social cohesion.

The measures introduced have been aimed at stimulating demand and take up of skills development in areas thought to have greatest impact on the economy and productivity. There is an increasingly strong emphasis on the need for employers and, to a lesser extent, individuals to determine the skills provision on offer and to increase their contribution to the costs of training beyond the minimum threshold for employability, with Government providing for the latter.

The 2005 white paper *Skills: getting on in business, getting on at work* (2), described policies intended to place employers' needs centre stage in the design and delivery of training. The main mechanism for this was the establishment of a National Employer Training Programme (NETP), subsequently branded as the Train to Gain service. This provides free training in basic skills and Level 2 vocational provision, designed for employers and delivered to suit their operational needs. It also provides a brokerage system, which markets the provision to employers and conducts training needs analyses. In addition to this funded support, the service is intended to provide a full range of business support services and higher level training, for which employers will pay.

The same white paper also gave responsibility to the occupational Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) to identify the skills employers need to improve productivity now and into the future in Sector Skills Agreements, with an action plan to drive up skill levels in each sector. Alongside this, SSCs were to develop sector qualification strategies as part of the new Framework for Achievement.

The policy objective of increasing the proportion of funding from employers and individuals and decreasing the proportion from the state, and structural changes to bring this about, are also described in *Skills: getting on in business, getting on at work* and progress towards achievement is described in the 2007 white paper *Further Education: raising skills, improving life chances* (4), which updates the 2006 white paper *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances* (DfES).

The Foster review of further education in 2005, *Realising the potential: a review of the future of further education colleges* (4) advised on the key challenges and opportunities facing FE colleges. It concluded that colleges should have a core focus on skills and employability, and should develop specialisms as in Centres of Vocational Excellence and Skills Academies. This review was influential in the policy proposals in the 2006 White Paper *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances*, which proposed changes to the further education system to realise its potential as the ‘powerhouse of a high skills economy’ and to deliver the government’s skills agenda. The thrust of the white paper was to make publicly funded training and training providers more responsive to the needs of the employer.

The 2006 white paper also proposed:

- increased specialisation and vocational excellence through national sector-based networks led by Skills Academies, with all colleges and providers having links to these and developing at least one specialism;
- a new standard for employer responsiveness and vocational excellence, which accredits providers’ employer responsiveness;
- changes to the adult learning budget, primarily to fund the Train to Gain service, enabling employer demand to determine the provision paid for from the public purse; and to (re) introduce Adult Learning Accounts, enabling learners to access training they consider to be relevant to their needs. This shifts the balance towards demand-led funding, although the provision for which public funding is available is restricted to what are considered to be skills for employability, and higher-level skills seen to be a priority for development.

Employers are also being urged to take more responsibility for the planning and delivery of skills development. The Leitch review published in 2006, *Prosperity for all in the global economy: world class skills* (3), which informed the white paper, concluded that the scale of development required to secure a world-class workforce would require a doubling of current efforts. Government considers that this scale of development necessitates increasing employers’ influence in determining skills needs, and increasing the responsiveness of providers to deliver high quality skills development in ways that best meet employers’ needs.

The Leitch review also proposed that there should be an emphasis on economically valuable skills, which would bring the greatest return to the economy, and that the responsibility for skills development should be shared between employers, individuals and the state. It suggested that employers should commit to skills development, and that the government should introduce legislation to bring this about if the current voluntarist approach does not work.

The key policy drivers in relation to meeting employers' needs are therefore:

- government's belief that skills development is the key to economic prosperity and social justice;
- employers' needs to be centre stage in the design and delivery of training;
- stimulating demand and take up of skills development in economically valuable skills;
- public subsidy for 'employability' i.e. training in basic skills and Level 2 vocational provision;
- increasing employers' and individuals' contribution to the costs of training beyond this level;
- sector based approaches to the development and accreditation of skills provision;
- a clear mission for further education to help people gain the skills and qualifications for employability;
- new employer led providers developing specialisms and vocational excellence.

As the nation moves further into a period of considerable economic uncertainty, these drivers remain as valid as they were before recession, but with some additions. There seems to be increasing emphasis not simply on up-skilling, but also on re-skilling, as demonstrated by the report of the House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, which undertook detailed analysis of the appropriateness of Leitch targets and 'direction of travel' in the new economic circumstances. It questioned how realistic the Leitch agenda is and how may need to be adapted. The report contains a highly useful list and brief individual explanation of government policy papers between July 2007 and September 2008

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmdius/48/48i.pdf>

Research efforts continue to focus on the effectiveness of the new demand-led system, particularly the effectiveness of links between learning providers and employers and the challenge of simplifying the system of 'brokerage' and other means of connecting supply and demand. The important LSIS-commissioned CBI report *Reaching further: workforce development through employer-FE college partnership* (2009) (item 17) is one recent and influential example of this.

The Leitch review was part of a great period and process of policy development towards a 'demand-led' system. Combined with economic recession and emerging critiques of how realistic Leitch is and whether the emphatic new policy direction is the correct one has been a rapidly growing concentration on policy implementation, led by the DIUS plan *World class skills: implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England* (2007) and the Leitch-proposed UK Commission for Employment and Skills proposals entitled *Simplification of skills in England* (2008). (This plan and these proposals, important and significant as they are, are not included in the catalogue as they do not constitute 'research' according to the criteria).

As employment and skills policy is realised, so there are opportunities for evaluation, and these have been taken up by Ofsted and the Centre for Excellence in Leadership. Building on policy development and strongly linked to implementation is a UKCES survey whose results form the basis of calls for providers to meet 'the employability challenge' (*The employability challenge*, UKCES 2009), and a CBE survey *Taking stock: CBI education and skills survey* (2008) (item 27). Those involved in employment, vocational training and skills policy over the last few decades, and with research and historical knowledge stretching further back still, may not be surprised by the problems, the prescriptions and the proposed solutions in the early part of the 21st Century.

The next few years will see how policy based on the Leitch review plays out against the backdrop of recession and hopefully recovery, and how successful implementation has been, is and will be.



## Section 2

# Catalogue of research, materials and resources

This catalogue lists the materials identified by the thematic review of current and recent research findings, relevant materials and resources. Items were selected that inform and support improvement.

### Scope of the research

For all themes, the focus was on research, policy or policy-related documents and materials produced since 2000, in English, relevant to the post-16 further education system in England, and readily accessible to provider organisations and other interested parties. Materials from other sectors and countries were not included, and all materials selected had to have been subject to quality assurance. Each review is designed to stand alone.

### Meeting Employers' Needs

This catalogue concerns the effectiveness of providers' work with employers and the tailoring of programmes to meet employers' needs, including provision delivered through the Train to Gain service, relationships with skills brokers and other key stakeholders, and the delivery of apprenticeships, full cost and customised provision. The Leitch Review of 2006 highlighted the need for increased skills at all levels to increase productivity and competitiveness and current policy prioritises the development of training provision to meet employers' needs. Responsiveness to employers is a key performance dimension within the Framework for Excellence.

The documents in this catalogue are grouped under the following headings:

- Policy development
- Policy implementation
- Improving practice
- Views of employers

## Policy Development

### Item no: 1

#### Reference type:

Other: report to the Secretary of State

**Author:** Foster A.

**Year:** 2005

#### Title:

Realising the potential: a review of the future of further education colleges

**Place of publication:** London

#### Publisher:

Department of Education and Skills (DfES)/Learning and Skills Council

#### Commissioning body:

Department of Education and Skills (DfES)

#### Notes:

This document reports on a review of further education that has formed the basis of much of the subsequent reform across the sector. The review's remit was to advise on the key challenges and opportunities facing further education colleges. Its main focus is on the further education system, and it emphasises the values of greater clarity of mission, and improved leadership, organisation and management, with meeting the needs of learners and business as the criteria for progress. Some recommendations are directly related to meeting employers' needs, and these are summarised below. The report contains good practice examples from named providers to illustrate some of the recommendations and data and other evidence to support its recommendations. Appendix 2 consists of useful comparisons between the UK FE system and those in the USA, Denmark, Australia, Netherlands, and Canada.

#### Findings relevant to improvement

##### Developing further education colleges to meet employers' needs

Colleges' should focus on skills and employability, increasing the pool of employable people and working to enhance business productivity.

Qualifications and learning pathways should be streamlined to ensure that clear learner pathways and opportunities for progression to higher levels exist across the country.

There should be greater specialisation, for example through Centres of Vocational Excellence and Skills Academies. This will help to improve retention, results, value for money and industry support.

Colleges should look at what more they need to do to improve their offer to employers both through their primary role in improving the pool of employability and skills and in response to specific employer needs.

Colleges should work with the LSC to develop a network of 'business' colleges focused on the needs of employers as proposed under agenda for change. This should include developing the new national standard in the design and delivery of workforce development service to employers.

Link: <http://www.dius.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/migratedd/publications/r/realising-report-summary.pdf>

## Policy implementation

### Item no: 2

#### Reference type:

Research report

#### Author:

House of Commons  
Innovation, Universities,  
Science and Skills Committee

Year: 2009

#### Title:

Re-skilling for recovery: after Leitch, implementing skills and training policies. First report of session 2008-9 Volume 1

Place of publication: London

Publisher: HMSO

#### Commissioning body:

House of Commons

#### Notes:

This is a report of the select committee inquiry into the implementation of the Leitch agenda. In addition to FE, it covers higher education and lifelong learning.

#### Submissions were specifically invited on:

- The responses of RDAs to Leitch and how coherent and structured these are;
- What the existing regional delivery structures are and what further sub regional strategies may be required;
- The role of the LSC and SSCs in this context;
- The respective roles of the further education and higher education sectors in delivering a region based agenda for Leitch and their coordination with one other;
- The impact on students of these initiatives, particularly in the context of policies of lifelong learning.

The report takes a critical overview of the impact of the Leitch agenda and assesses how the UK and more specifically England can move towards achieving the ambitious targets within a tight timescale. This is put in context of the current economic climate which is very different from that in which Lord Leitch conducted the review and places skills development at the top of the political and employment agenda.

The report accepts that skills levels need to rise but questions remain about whether the Leitch agenda is realistic, whether the current direction of implementation is right and what action the Government should take now to improve the skills position in the UK in difficult times.

The Committee firstly examines the principles and targets introduced by the Leitch agenda and the Government's plans for implementation. The remainder of the report examines progress towards the realisation of the vision set out in the Leitch review in terms of delivery structures and programmes (chapter 3), employers (chapter 4), training providers such as FE colleges (chapter 5) and individuals including the role of trade unions, a key but often unacknowledged partner in skills delivery. The conclusions are presented in chapter 7.

The publication includes an annex from the National Audit Office which lists the different organisations involved in skills and charts showing how they relate to each other. The charts in particular show how complicated the system has become. Another annex contains a useful list and summary of government policy papers from July 2007 to September 2008.

## Item no: 2 *Continued*

### Findings relevant to improvement

In the context of a very wide-ranging and comprehensive inquiry covering every aspect of the Leitch agenda, learning providers should:

- Ensure that they are completely up to date with current developments so that they can take full advantage of currently available opportunities
- Explore ways of providing a truly flexible and responsive service for employers and individuals within Train to Gain and other initiatives
- Position themselves for future changes such as more flexible 'rules' for engagement with employers and incentives for closer HE/FE collaboration

Link: <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.com/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmdius/48/48i.pdf>

## Item no: 3

### Reference type:

Research report

**Author:** UKCES

**Year:** 2009

### Title:

The Employability Challenge

**Place of publication:** London

**Publisher:** UKCES

**Commissioning body:** UKCES

### Notes:

Many learning providers help learners develop employability skills. Many neglect to teach them, for funding or capacity reasons. This document claims to set out an unequivocal challenge to practitioners and policy makers to raise the status of employability skills, improve practice in developing them and create a policy environment in which good practice flourishes. It involved the participation of over 200 organisations, including 20 that formed the basis of case studies. It offers practical approaches to the question how do people develop employability skills through summarising existing evidence and reviewing the practice of several organisations in the field including FE colleges. The aim is to provide a starting point for those who want to improve the employability of their learners.

The challenge posed by UKCES is for learning providers to make employability part of their core business.

### Developing employability skills entails:

- Experiential action learning: using skills rather than simply acquiring knowledge, emphasis on trial and error, and clear focus on the pay-offs for the learner in employment and progression;
- Work experience: a work placement in an actual business or an authentic classroom simulation based on a real workplace;
- Opportunities for reflection and integration.

**Benefits, or pay-offs for providers in engaging employers are discussed including:**

- Understanding the training need;
- Motivation for learners – a workplace makes the training relevant and goals believable;
- An optimised learning environment that creates pressures, ambiguity, consequences for good or bad work;
- Better chance of attracting funding in the current and developing funding world.

**Also discussed in this report are:**

- Identifying and approaching employers;
- Developing a business case that articulates how the employer will benefit from participation;
- The limitations of corporate social responsibility.

UKCES recognises that the challenge for providers is not to understand how to develop employability skills but that it is difficult to put that understanding into practice.

**Findings relevant to improvement**

The report helpfully provides checklists at each stage that provide pointers about what should be done:

- Employer involvement action checklist – pp 27-28
- Leadership and resources action checklist – p 34
- Programme design and delivery – pp 55-56

**In particular, learning providers should:**

- Adopt and improve existing good practice in the field;
- Shift resources into building relationships with employers to support employability skills;
- Build an institutional culture that supports employability;
- Make the learning environment resemble the workplace;
- Invest in the capacity of their staff to develop employability skills;

Link: <http://www.ukces.org.uk/tags/employability-challenge-full-report>

**Item no: 4****Reference type:**

Research report

**Author:** IFF Research**Year:** 2008**Title:**

Supporting progression routes within Train to Gain

**Place of publication:**

web based only

**Publisher:**

Quality Improvement Agency

**Notes:**

This report sets out findings from research into the effectiveness of measures used by providers to encourage progression of learners within Train to Gain. Delivering progression routes is an important part of Train to Gain's objective of stimulating ongoing demand for learning across the workforce. Effective IAG for both learners and employers is seen as crucial for achieving this.

Research was based on: eleven in-depth interviews with relevant stakeholders from the Learning and Skills Council; 47 in-depth interviews with representatives of Train to Gain contracted providers; and a telephone survey with 322 Train to Gain contracted providers.

**Key findings from the research included:**

- Most providers feel there is demand for progression within Train to Gain especially in the Health and Social Care and Childcare sectors.
- Although providers discuss progression pathways with employers and learners at the beginning of a course to help employers plan for the future, this is less frequently done at the end of a course.
- Most providers feel that securing progression for Train to Gain learners places extra demands on their organisation.

**Findings relevant to improvement**

- The survey suggests that co-operation between providers and Train to Gain Skills Brokers is limited. Many providers feel they have greater expertise in delivering advice on development options and know more about the provision available locally than the Skills Brokers in the region.
- Providers that cannot offer, or do not look to offer, progression opportunities to employers may underestimate the demand for follow-up training.
- Progression pathways are almost always discussed with employers and learners before training commences but this is less often the case at the end of the training.
- There is some evidence of providers working together to secure effective progression routes and many give information about relevant courses provided by others. As yet this is mainly through informal sharing of information at inter-provider meetings and ad hoc enquiries. Further work could help establish more formal links for sharing information on learner and employer training needs, training history and eligibility for train to gain.

#### Item no: 4 *Continued*

- Attention could also be paid to ensuring transferability and compatibility between different levels or modules of courses. Some providers have already attempted to co-ordinate start dates and duration.
- There is a need to train staff in delivering advice on skills issues to employers and learners.

Link: <http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/168250>

#### Item no: 5

**Reference type:**

Research report

**Author:**

Quality Improvement Agency

**Year:** 2008

**Title:**

Train to Gain  
Improvement Projects

**Place of publication:**

web based only

**Publisher:**

Quality Improvement  
Agency

#### **Notes:**

This document reports on the findings from Improvement Projects conducted in the first year of the QIA's Development Programme for Train to Gain. These projects aimed to support providers in identifying and addressing issues they face in delivering Train to Gain and employer responsive provision, focusing on the following themes:

- Developing flexible delivery for Train to Gain;
- Working with employers as customers.

Five key topics were identified within each theme and end-of-project reports were received from 69 providers.

Establishing the organisation's starting point in relation to the topic area was crucial to ensure that the development activity matched the development needs. An audit and action-planning tool was developed for each of the topic areas against which providers could assess and address their performance. Project participants also sought the views of employers and other stakeholders on the audit results, identified priorities for development, tested new approaches and solutions relating to these and evaluated the applicability and impact of the solutions

Most of the projects produced comprehensive audits and commented on the value of this approach to them and participants liked the structure provided by the approach.

#### **Findings relevant to improvement**

##### **Interpreting business needs in training programmes**

Key messages highlighted the importance of providers:

- Communicating internally to develop common practices for working with employers and sharing information on employers;
- Training and developing staff, keeping them regularly updated on available products and services for employers;
- Working to a common goal throughout the organisation.

### **Using the workplace as a basis for learning**

Projects developed a range of ways for encouraging an emphasis on the workplace as a basis for learning when planning learning programmes, including: working groups and checklists and protocols for employer engagement. In some cases, the activities successfully acted as a catalyst for changing the way the workplace is viewed within the context of learning.

### **Assessing vocational and Skills for Life and using outcomes in ILPs**

There is a need in general for greater communication across departments in carrying out initial assessments of vocational and Skills for Life needs in order to secure consistency of approach and improve quality. There is also a need for greater employer engagement in initial assessments and in the development of Individual Learning Plans. Actions taken by the projects included establishing working groups, running CPD sessions, revisions of systems and procedures, and the development of materials and tools.

### **Implementing Assess-Train-Assess**

The Assess-Train-Assess approach can be implemented in different ways but training must always be a central component. Colleges in particular have inherent difficulties in securing a flexible approach to work-based assessment and training. Staff contracts and conditions of service limit flexible working, and bolt-on models, such as in business development units, fall down when the scope and volume of workforce development increases beyond the capacity of the staff on more flexible contracts.

Processes for initial assessment should recognise the requirement of the Assess-Train-Assess approach. The training role of Assessors needs to be clarified and support provided for those taking on this role. Activities undertaken in relation to this theme included:

- A detailed staff audit of current skills and experience;
- Development and delivery of tailored CPD relating to interpreting and implementing the Assess-Train-Assess model;
- Reviewing staff contracts and job roles, and expanding capacity.

### **Embedding Skills for Life in vocational learning**

Work is needed to ensure that Skills for Life is embedded in responsive provision and that skills brokers and business managers share knowledge or contacts effectively with Skills for Life teachers. Improvement project activity included developing models and resources to embed Skills for life within a particular NVQ.



### **Using Labour Market intelligence to understand market needs**

LMI needs to be more effectively sourced and used in informing programme development. Improvement Project providers generally appeared to have little information on demand for skills in the local area. Projects looked at how to improve their sources and use of LMI and at developing their capacity to gather systematically LMI and information about drivers for change at a local level.

### **Effective customer care for employers**

Effectively dealing with enquiries, maintaining relationships with employers and monitoring and resolving issues and concerns that arise are all crucial for delivering employer responsive provision. Improvement Projects looked at business processes and the development of systems in relation to:

- Employer Charters;
- Customer orientation – from learner to employer focus – and culture change;
- Implementation of CRM systems and staff development relating to their introduction;
- Mapping the process from enquiry to evaluation.

### **Relationship management, account management and repeat business**

Robust management information systems are needed to develop and maintain relationships with employer customers. This is particularly the case in large and general FE providers. Smaller WBL providers, especially those in niche markets working with a small number of employers, may be better prepared to develop and sustain employer-facing work. Where providers are working in consortia, service level agreements need to be developed and implemented consistently across them.

Activities implemented by Improvement Project providers included:

- Developing policies and procedures to be fed in to quality improvement plans;
- Piloting and reviewing an employer service level agreement;
- Implementing and developing CRM systems;
- Developing a consortium-wide marketing strategy;
- Producing promotional materials to raise awareness of 'the offer'.

## Item no: 5 *Continued*

### Marketing the benefits of training to employers

Approaches to communication, promotion and marketing materials need to be appropriate to employers. Extensive use of jargon and inappropriate content of some marketing materials will fail to engage some employers. The projects identified and developed different approaches to marketing, including:

- the use of case studies;
- a toolkit for sales staff, which identifies measurable impacts for training;
- staff training manuals.

### Meeting the needs of SMEs

Tailored provision and communication is even more important when dealing with SMEs than with other employers. Personalising content is much more effective than a 'one size fits all' approach. Developing good customer relations and networks are crucially important. Projects considered bespoke marketing approaches for specific sectors and getting better feedback from SMEs to improve the service they were offering them.

Link: <http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/page.aspx?o=197106>

## Item no: 6

### Reference type:

Research report

**Author:** RCU Ltd

**Year:** 2008

### Title:

What is the impact of CoVE clusters on employer engagement and delivery

### Place of publication:

web based only

### Publisher:

Quality Improvement Agency

### Notes:

Engaging with and responding to the needs of employers is one of the key remits of CoVEs. This report sets out findings from research looking at the impact of clusters of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) in linked industrial sectors on employer engagement and delivery. More broadly, it explores the link between specialisation in provision and organisational culture, identifying good practice in relation to employer responsiveness.

Research methodology was based on desk research of existing relevant documentation; a postal survey of all 241 institutions that were either the lead provider in a joint CoVE or had CoVE status in their own right; visits and telephone interviews with some providers; and 12 interviews with regional and national stakeholders.

Findings suggest that CoVEs have been effective in improving employer responsiveness, and that this is enhanced when a provider operates more than one CoVE. Some key areas of good practice and critical success factors for developing a whole organisation approach to employer engagement are set out below. Although identified in the specific context of CoVEs, many of them have relevance for providers more generally.

### Findings relevant to improvement

- Involvement of employers is crucial for a CoVE's impact. Survey responses indicated that involving the employer from the outset can generate a high degree of employer ownership, and therefore engagement.
- Some CoVEs found that use of labour market information provided by the Sector Skills Council helped inform employer engagement activities.
- Effective partnerships – with other providers, employers or other stakeholders – are generally characterised by joint ownership of needs analysis and a willingness to establish structures to increase responsiveness across units or organisations.
- Clustering of CoVEs is particularly effective, and their impact is greater where they serve a high concentration of relevant employers in the regional labour market.
- Freeing up manager time so that they can play an active role in external networks, listen more closely to employer needs and make better use of labour market information is a key factor for successful employer engagement.
- CoVEs work particularly well where they operate in several parts of a provider's curriculum range and where their operations are co-ordinated and aligned to a clear strategic mission.
- Investing in new equipment that is more relevant to the workplace not only helps attract employers but can also help change the outlook of staff who might be more used to "academic" methods of teaching and learning.
- Consistency and the development of a common culture across the CoVE is a key success factor for successful employer engagement.
- Institutions should work to ensure lessons from CoVE operations are learnt across the organisation. This will help to improve employers' perceptions, not just of the CoVEs but of FE provision in general.

Link: [http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/pdf/CoVE\\_SummaryWEB\\_re\\_1.0\\_20080103.pdf](http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/pdf/CoVE_SummaryWEB_re_1.0_20080103.pdf)

**Item no: 7****Reference type:**

Research report

**Author:**

Hughes M. and Monteiro H.

**Year:** 2005**Title:**Improving the grade  
in work-based learning**Place of publication:** London**Publisher:** LSDA**Commissioning body:** LSDA**Notes:**

This publication reports on research into the quality of work-based learning (WBL) delivered between 2002 and 2004. It built on previous work carried out by LSDA in 2001/02, which identified a number of issues inhibiting quality of WBL provision. The 2005 research was therefore intended to investigate whether quality of provision had improved, as measured through retention and achievement rates and inspection grades. The research methodology incorporated: a qualitative review of inspection reports; a statistical analysis of retention and achievement data and Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) inspection and success rates; and interviews with relevant stakeholders.

Overall, the research points to some improvement in the quality of WBL in recent years. Since WBL is delivered in the workplace, it is likely that effective provision will inherently meet employers' needs. The main findings relating to good practice in WBL are summarised below, with particular attention to points that directly address interaction with employers.

The report also refers to national actions which would support improvement in WBL, including:

- assisting SMEs by extending the financial support for time off for learning in the Employer Training Pilots to other WBL programmes;
- capacity-building for quality improvement across the sector including pre- and post- inspection support, and targeting quality improvement;
- encouraging providers to embed continuous improvement in their business planning;
- involving employers in developing, documenting and analysing examples of good practice, as a means of strengthening employer engagement and improving providers' expertise.

**Findings relevant to improvement****Quality of provision**

Good quality WBL provision is generally characterised by clear co-ordination of on and off the job training. Specialist providers that have a clear and limited focus appear to perform better than the generalists.

**Effective providers of WBL will typically have:**

- strong employer networks and an understanding of skills' needs across the sector;
- good teaching, good learner retention and achievement, good quality assurance, promotion of equality of opportunity;
- strong leadership and management.

## Item no: 7 *Continued*

Support for new developments within work-based learning programmes should include support for providers, sub-contractors, employers and work-based assessors and mentors. Links to related initiatives such as Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) should be made.

### Understanding employers needs

Providers should communicate with employers in planning and delivering WBL in order to ensure provision meets their needs. In particular, providers should ensure that:

- everyone, especially employers, understands exactly what the training programme entails and where responsibility for specific tasks lies;
- the requirements of the training programme are matched with opportunities for learning in the workplace and plans are made to fill any identified gaps;
- initial assessment of the capabilities and aspirations of learners is used to match them to appropriate work placements or programmes of training;
- assessment activities are set in an occupational context.

Providers should recognise the specific issues faced by SMEs who are using WBL. Time and financial constraints can present significant barriers to employers releasing employees for training or undertaking quality assurance.

Link to PDF: <https://www.lseducation.org.uk/user/order.aspx?code=051984&src=XOWEB>

## Item no: 8

**Reference type:**  
Research report

**Author:**  
Hughes M. and Monterio H.

**Year:** 2005

**Title:**  
Identifying effective practice in the delivery of apprenticeships

**Place of publication:** London

**Publisher:** LSDA

**Commissioning body:** LSDA

### Notes:

This report identifies characteristics of good practice in relation to the delivery of Apprenticeship programmes. It provides a commentary on the extent to which features are currently in place and provides examples of good practice and barriers to further development. Research involved a literature review of relevant sources to develop criteria for good practice. These formed the basis of a questionnaire of WBL providers, which were followed with a number of site visits to providers to identify good practice and barriers to its development. Research findings point to considerable consensus surrounding what constitutes effective practice.

Apprenticeships potentially provide a direct route into employment via education but their effective delivery requires considerable co-ordination between providers, employers and other partners. All the criteria for good practice in delivery of apprenticeships identified in the report are therefore set out below. However, particular attention is paid to points specifically relating to interaction with employers.

## **Findings relevant to improvement**

### **Programme planning**

Effective planning ensures that all partners are fully aware of the Apprenticeship framework and their roles and responsibilities within it. Programmes should be designed to deliver the framework and its components to best meet employers' needs.

### **Recruitment**

Good quality recruitment materials and partnerships with relevant local agencies contribute to the above.

### **Induction**

Induction to the apprenticeship should familiarize learners with the employers' organisation, the requirements of the framework and various roles and responsibilities. Thorough induction can help 'manage' expectations and ensure all information requirements are met.

### **Initial assessments**

Initial assessments should ensure learners are matched to the programme and level suitable for them.

### **Managing individual learning plans**

Individual Learning Plans (ILP) should outline the programme of learning agreed between the employer, provider and learner. They should fully reflect the needs of employers and abilities of learners. Learners should be involved in developing them, and they should be regularly reviewed and amended if requirements change.

### **Supporting the learner**

The learner's support needs should be known to all partners, including employers.

### **Reviewing progress and target setting**

Reviewing progress and setting targets can motivate learners. Involving all parties in this ensures that learner, employer and framework needs are met.

### **Delivery of key skill requirements**

Key skills training should start as early as possible. Providers should work to address employers' lack of recognition of the value of key skills in the workplace.

### **Off the job learning**

Off the job learning is most effective when employers are involved. Research suggests that some providers avoid doing this because they think employers are not interested in what goes on in the classroom.

### **On the job learning**

On the job learning should be tailored to meet the needs of both employer and learner. More could be done to ensure that workplace staff are appropriately trained and experienced in understanding the qualification.

### **Additionality and enrichment**

There should be means of developing additional skills and/or qualifications or participation in learning outside the Apprenticeship programme.

### **Recording evidence and portfolios**

Effective recording of evidence and achievements is crucial for effective delivery of apprenticeships.

### **Progression and employability**

Clear and effective guidance can help learners to progress in the workplace once they have finished the apprentice. This benefits the employer too.

### **Management of training programmes**

Apprenticeship programmes should manage to integrate the needs of learners and employers as well as the framework requirements. Providers should improve the involvement of employers in wider aspects of the programme – such as off the job learning and monitoring and evaluation.

Link: <https://www.lseducation.org.uk/user/order.aspx?code=051991&src=XOWEB>

**Item no: 9****Reference type:**

Research report

**Author:**

McCoshan A., Costello M.  
and Souto Otero, M.

**Year:** 2005

**Title:**

Work-based learning  
providers' views on their  
links with employers

**Place of publication:**

Birmingham

**Publisher:**

Ecotec Research &  
Consulting Limited

**Commissioning body:**

Department of Education  
and Skills (DfES)

**Notes:**

This report investigates the views of Work Based Learning providers (WBLPs) on their links with employers. The research methodology included: a literature review, a survey of 135 work based learning providers; interviews with 12 WBLP managers, and with stakeholders; and eight case studies.

The study generated findings about the ways in which WBLPs engage with employers, the factors that shape these, the barriers that stand in the way of greater responsiveness and the impact of policy.

It found that WBLPs have a distinctive role in the provision of WBL and differ from further education colleges because of different drivers; 'responsiveness' should be understood as having different meanings for WBLPs and for colleges. For WBLPs, the greatest drivers are funding and the qualification framework. WBL providers tend to rely on LSC income. These differences should be reflected in policies and strategies at national and local levels.

Inflexibility of funding and qualifications are also major barriers. Current frameworks make it difficult for employers to see how qualifications can help to improve their business and the contribution they can make to the bottom line.

**Findings relevant to improvement****Involving employers**

Effective employer engagement means engaging employers in the designing and delivering WBL to negotiate a solution to their training needs. This should also involve the learner. To do this means building deep and long lasting relationships with employers.

Face to face contact is the preferred mode of contact between provider and employer despite being extensive, time- consuming and expensive.

Link: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RW35.pdf>



**Item no: 10**

**Reference type:**

Research report

**Author:**

Hughes M., Smeaton B.  
and Hall G.

**Year:** 2004

**Title:** A Cut Above

**Place of publication:** London

**Publisher:** LSDA

**Commissioning body:**

UK Skills and LSDA

**Notes:**

This publication reports on research undertaken by UK Skills and LSDA into the development of a vocational curriculum for excellence. It builds on previous research on the subject and looks at how teaching and learning methods can help learners to develop their technical and personal skills to achieve excellence. Although pointing to significant progress in recent years, notably the strengthening of NVQs and growth in COVEs, the report states that more work is required to improve vocational training and deliver the skills needed by employers. It suggests there is currently a lack of clarity surrounding employers' roles and responsibility for training employees. Its findings are designed to inform the development of the vocational curriculum for excellence, which should incorporate effectively meeting employers' needs,

The report draws on the findings of action research case studies, in seven colleges.

### **Findings relevant to improvement**

#### **Role of teachers**

The skills, knowledge, commitment and expertise of teachers are the most important resource in a curriculum for excellence. They should consider different ways of teaching and learning, matching appropriate methods to situations and groups of learners in order to improve achievement and performance.

#### **Planning and implementing the curriculum**

Teachers and learners should have high expectations of the standards they can achieve. Excellence can be encouraged through actively involving learners in planning and implementing an enhanced curriculum. Flexibility in adapting teaching and learning strategies is also important.

#### **Highlighting excellence**

Peer assessment can be effective, helping to re-enforce the value of excellence. In addition, exposing students to 'experts' or 'professionals' in the field of their study can have a positive effect on motivation and achievement.

#### **Partnerships**

Building relationships with external agencies including employers can broaden the activities a college can offer. In the case of employers, this can include work placements and other arrangements of mutual benefit.

## Item no: 10 *Continued*

### Resources

Careful planning should ensure that any initiative introduced to encourage excellence makes best use of teacher and learner time and also fits with the wider learning programme.

### Incentives

College find that NVQs may not allow the flexibility required to encourage excellence. NVQs do not require development of higher levels of skills or, additional skills, or promote personal characteristics such as confidence self esteem and pride. The lack of grading within NVQs reduces incentive to perform at the highest level. Incentives other than achieving an NVQ are needed to encourage the development of excellence in vocational learning.

## Item no: 11

**Reference type:**  
Research report

**Author:**  
Hughes M. and Stanton G.

**Year:** 2003

**Title:**  
A basis for skills: developing the 'college for business' in Sussex

**Place of publication:** London

**Publisher:** LSDA

**Commissioning body:**  
Sussex LSC

### Notes:

This publication is part of the LSDA collection 'A basis for skills'. Sussex LSC and LSDA worked together to develop the concept of the 'college for business', and pilot its implementation in three colleges. The colleges audited their provision against the criteria set out and the original concepts were revised.

The publication provides an audit instrument for colleges wishing to assess their provision against the 'colleges for business' model. Five distinct dimensions of activity are suggested as important within the college for business:

- Gateway to the workplace: where initial knowledge and skills will be developed. This may be defined by age, i.e. provision for 14–19 year olds on college or work-based programmes, but could also include provision for graduates and returners to the workforce;
- Adaptation and updating: providing training for the current workforce to acquire new processes and adaptation to new technologies;
- Problem solving and innovation: developing services to accelerate innovation or solve business problems;
- Support networks for SMEs: to support the exchange of ideas and good practice;
- An underpinning mission and infrastructure: to support implementation of the model.

The initiative formed the basis for an accredited standard for employer engagement, 'Action for Business Colleges' (since renamed, 'Action for Business Skills'). The standard was rolled out across the whole of the South East region and providers in other regions also began to work towards the accreditation until the development of the New Standard for Employer Responsiveness.

**Item no: 11** *Continued*

The audit instrument is included as an annex to the report. See also the self-assessment tool in Item 8: both these have been influential in the development of QIA's Framework to measure and improve employer responsiveness, which is being used in the Development Programme for Train to Gain to review provision prior to colleges and WBL providers committing to the achievement of the New Standard.

**Findings relevant to improvement**

**Strategic development of the 'college for business'**

The criteria developed by LSDA are an effective means of auditing current provision and services.

The concept of the 'college for business' should not be equated with the provision of full cost, short courses for employers or seen as the sole responsibility of business development units.

The gateway to the workplace 'pre-service' dimension enables a wider range of staff to see what the 'college for business' concept may mean to their learners by requiring them to consider how learners can develop awareness of the world of work through their regular curriculum.

Time must be allocated to raise awareness of staff across the college; conduct the audit, prepare a development plan and ensure that it forms part of the overall college planning procedures.

Link: [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?\\_nfpb=true&\\_ERICExtSearch\\_SearchValue\\_0=ED478446&\\_ERICExtSearch\\_SearchType\\_0=no&accno=ED478446](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED478446&_ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED478446)

**Item no: 12****Reference type:**  
Evaluation report**Author:**  
Hillage J., Loukas G.,  
Newton B. and Tamkin P;  
*Institute for Employment  
Studies***Year:** 2006**Title:**  
Employer Training Pilots:  
Final Evaluation Report**Place of publication:** London**Publisher:**  
Department of Education  
and Skills (DfES)**Commissioning body:**  
Department of Education  
and Skills (DfES)**Notes:**

This extensive evaluation aims to assess the nature and extent of the take-up of the Employer Training Pilots, which were initially introduced in the White Paper Skills: *getting on in business*, *getting on at work*. The research looks at key issues affecting how the pilots operate in practice and the experiences of employers and employees who took part. The evaluation had two main strands. There was a quantitative assessment of the effect of ETP on workplace training activity in pilot and control areas, through analysis of surveys of potentially eligible employers and employees, and other sources, including the Labour Force Survey. This was complemented by a more qualitative 'process' evaluation including surveys and interviews with the main stakeholders, providers, employers and learners involved in each of the pilot areas, and analysis of management information data.

Research findings suggest that pilots had been relatively successful at engaging employers with limited previous experience of training, and that low-skilled employees appeared to be benefiting the most. Costs and loss of staff time were the main barriers cited for lack of training provision in the past. Employers identified the most attractive element of the pilot offer as being that it was free and flexibly driven. Wage compensation was considered important to around ten per cent of the employers involved and in particular in securing initial interest.

**Findings relevant to improvement****Benefits for employers**

'The brokerage elements of the pilots and help with identifying training needs were particularly attractive to 'hard to reach' employers.

Most learners consider that their training would make them more likely to stay with their existing employers.

Employers generally consider that the ETP training led employees to gain more confidence, improve skills to do their current, or a future, job and improved the quality of outputs. Fewer employers (although still a majority) report improved productivity and labour turnover.

A high proportion of employers respondents consider that ETP had improved the quality of their promotion pool, and just over half say they were paying more (or are likely to pay more) to those who have been trained.

## Item no: 12 *Continued*

Organisations with the most positive approach to training in the first place, tend to be the ones that experienced the most gains. 'Hard to reach' organisations, who are generally less positive about training in the first place are all significantly more negative about the gains that they or their employees have experienced from ETP.

### **Role of broker**

The key factors behind a successful brokerage service include:

- impartiality;
- good relationships between brokerage organisations and the pilot management;
- flexible approach to meeting employer demands;
- access to multiple funding streams;
- being able to understand an employer's business (over the course of the pilots the brokers have become less 'generalist' and begun to specialise more in certain sectors).

After-care support (visiting the employer after the training was completed to see if they had additional business support or training) needs to be improved. However, pilots are placing an increasing emphasis on this aspect of the service and encouraging brokers to make follow-up visits in Year 3. Nevertheless, most follow up appears to be done by providers.

### **Flexible provision**

ETP training tends to be organised to suit operations in the workplace. As a result of their involvement in the pilots, most training providers reported that in order to meet the requirements of ETP employers and learners, they had become more flexible in terms of the location, time or form of training delivery.

Link: [www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR774.pdf](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR774.pdf)

**Item no: 13****Reference type:**  
Inspectorate report**Author:**  
Adult Learning Inspectorate  
(ALI)/Ofsted**Year:** 2005**Title:**  
Centres of Vocational  
Excellence in Practice**Place of publication:**  
Coventry, UK**Publisher:** Ofsted/ALI**Commissioning body:**  
HM Government**Notes:**

This document reports on a survey of 40 Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) during roll out of the initiative. The development of a network of CoVEs was announced as a key element in modernising the further education sector in November 2000. The creation of specialist vocational centres within colleges and private training providers was seen as a means of strengthening the sector's response to national, regional and local economic challenges. It was envisaged that 400 CoVES would be established by 2006. As of July 2005, there were 70 fully operational CoVEs and a further 100 with interim status.

The report is intended to inform the sector on progress of the CoVE initiative, identifying critical success factors and areas for improvement. The report is structured around the initial eight aims of CoVEs set by the DfES/LSC. The most relevant to this project are:

**Aim 1:** a significant expansion in vocational learning, particularly a level 3, in terms of overall volumes and participation rates, as measured against the aims for expansion at level 3 identified in the development plan.

**Aim 2:** increased effectiveness in meeting skills priorities, particularly in responding to the needs of employers.

**Aim 3:** an improvement in learners' achievements in level 3 provision, including progression into employment and advancement within employment.

**Aim 5:** a significant increase in the extent of collaboration among learning providers, and the promotion of the concept of excellence and continuous improvement in economically important vocational specialisms.

**Aim 7:** examples of innovation and flexibility in order to meet the needs of employers.

**Aim 8:** a positive change in the attitude of employers and their involvement in training as a result of the quality of post-16 provision and its impact on meeting the skills needs of the workforce.

The report gives examples of good practice by named providers under the report on each aim. It also has a list of recommendations for individual CoVEs; CoVE networks and the LSC; and other stakeholders.

## Item no: 13 *Continued*

The report identifies successful and less successful factors according to how well CoVEs are meeting their aims, and draws recommendations from these. Evidence is not quantified. However, the report contains key messages for improvement in relation to meeting employers' needs. Although findings specifically relate to CoVEs, the principles can be extended to apply to other providers and provision.

The report makes recommendations for action by other stakeholders, including:

- the use of labour market information for developing regional skills strategies;
- improved response times on the part of awarding bodies and simplified procedures in accrediting programmes and approving variations in existing programmes, including more options for unit based achievement;
- consistency in government initiatives offering free or subsidized training so as not to compromise the development of full cost provision targeted at the same client groups;
- managing the expectations of employers, in relation to the government's requirement for increased employer investment to meet the costs of training for learners over 19 years of age.

### **Findings relevant to improvement**

#### **Provision**

Providers should:

- review their curriculum and ensure appropriate recruitment to programmes which lead to qualifications identified by sector skills councils;
- align the provision with regional priorities;
- promote full-cost bespoke provision for employers, including more options for flexible modes of delivery;
- develop the client base with greater emphasis on employers who have not previously accessed such training;
- develop training in response to regulatory and legislative changes in the relevant skills sector.

#### **Teaching, training and learning**

Providers should:

- ensure teachers are up to date with developments across the industry, with training where necessary;
- ensure learning activities and assignments reflect up to date practice;

**Item no: 13** *Continued*

- develop the use of ILT and virtual learning environments to promote active learning, extension activities and opportunities for independent study;
- ensure that the currency and high standards of specialist equipment are maintained, particularly in fast-moving sectors such as ICT.

**Marketing**

- Providers should develop marketing to improve brand recognition among employers, in particular to raise awareness among smaller organisations and those not regularly involved in training.

Link: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Post-16-learning-and-skills/Read-about-this-new-section/Centres-of-vocational-excellence-in-practice>

**Item no: 14**

**Reference type:**  
Inspectorate report

**Author:**  
Office for Standards  
in Education (Ofsted)

**Year:** 2004

**Title:**  
The responsiveness of  
colleges to the needs  
of employers

**Place of publication:** London

**Publisher:** TSO

**Commissioning body:**  
HM Government

**Notes:**

The survey was designed to inform the development of government, funding council and college policies by reporting how effectively colleges identify and respond to the needs of employers. The research methodology included: desk research on available evidence; a survey and visits to 11 sixth form colleges, 34 general further education colleges, 2 agricultural colleges, with additional visits to a further 35 colleges across the sector.

The report describes actions required at national level, including the need to:

- improve the clarity and consistency in the funding of training for employers and ensure that funding reflects the costs of training undertaken in-company;
- reduce and simplify the bureaucratic hurdles associated with the funding of qualifications, geographic boundaries, project funding and the requirements of the Individual Learner Record (ILR);
- provide funding for units of a full qualification;
- improve some employer's readiness to pay the cost of at least some training;
- ensure that all the employers develop training policies;
- develop common methods of measuring the responsiveness of colleges to employers' needs and establish national benchmarks against which a college's responsiveness can be gauged;
- tackle staff shortages in some curriculum areas;
- ensure that colleges and local LSCs adopt a co-ordinated approach to assessing individual employers' training needs, especially those of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).



**Item no: 14** *Continued*

The report outlines good practice and also suggests ways in which responsiveness could be improved across the sector.

**Findings relevant to improvement**

**Developing a whole-college approach to working with employers**

- Colleges should create a coherent cross-college strategic steer and clear targets.
- Colleges should improve the way in which they collate local labour market intelligence and translate it into development plans.
- Data systems should be developed to collect all the activity of a college and the relevant information held by each member of staff.
- Colleges should improve how they promote their work and what they can offer.
- Professional development programmes for college staff should support employer engagement.
- Staff contracts should enable a responsive approach to working with employers.
- Rigorous quality assurance systems should be in place for all aspects of the work.
- Colleges should establish an overarching policy on the development of skills for employability among existing learners and ensure that it is implemented appropriately in each curriculum area.

Link: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Education/Youth-services-and-careers/The-responsiveness-of-colleges-to-the-needs-of-employers>

**Item no: 15**

**Reference type:**  
Guidance handbook

**Author:**  
Train to Gain  
development programme

**Year: 2007**

**Title:**  
The Employer  
Responsiveness  
Resource Pack

**Place of publication:**  
Web-based only

**Publisher: QIA (web based)**

**Commissioning body: QIA**

**Notes:**

The *Employer Responsiveness Resource Pack* has been developed from the activities and outcomes of the first year of the Development Programme for Train to Gain. It is intended to address the most critical issues emerging from the delivery of employer responsive provision and will be useful to individuals, teams and organisations wanting to improve the responsiveness of their provision. Its contents are:

- Introduction;
- Using a framework to measure and improve employer responsiveness. This section considers the quality criteria and review tools developed during the Improvement Projects;
- Module 1: working with employers as customers;
- Module 2: developing flexible delivery and moving from provider-focused to employer-focused delivery;
- Module 3: developing responsive people and organisations. This module contains checklists, models, tools for analysis, case studies and scenarios;
- Module 4: partnership building for responsiveness. This module includes tools for developing well-grounded strategies;
- Glossary of terms.

The *Framework to measure and improve employer responsiveness* is a related resource that providers can use to assess and address their development needs in relation to employer responsiveness. The framework was drawn from research into effective practice and from a range of quality standards relating to responsive provision. It has been developed and modified through working with providers in the course of the Train to Gain Development Programme.

The framework provides a comprehensive picture of responsiveness and enables providers to conduct an end-to-end review of their business processes and to produce development plans for improvement in line with their strategic and business plans. It also includes advice on how to conduct a self-assessment; what constitutes evidence of performance; and how to produce a development plan for improvement activity.

**Findings relevant to improvement** are incorporated into these resources.

Link: <http://www.summitskills.org.uk/public/cms/File/TQS/QIA%20Introduction.pdf>

**Item no: 16****Reference type:**

Other: Summary report

**Author:**

Hughes M. and McLeod D.

**Year:** 2005**Title:**

What we know about working with employers: a synthesis of LSDA work on employer engagement

**Place of publication:** London**Publisher:** LSDA**Commissioning body:**

Department of Education and Skills (DfES)

**Notes:**

This paper is a review of work published by the LSDA, and its predecessor organisation FEDA, on employer engagement between 1999 and 2005. It looks at the development and implementation of thinking, policy and practice on employer engagement. It aims to enhance understanding of these issues amongst policy developers and practitioners within the learning and skills sector. It gives an overview of LSDA literature and the main messages from it, and a summary of proposals for effective practice and the future development of employer engagement. It includes a full list of references.

The review outlines a ‘typology’ of employer engagement to describe the different ways in which learning providers may interact with employers:

- employers as stakeholders, in which they provide leadership through their involvement in the design, development, management, delivery and assessment of learning;
- employers as consumers, in which they purchase diagnostic services and skills development from LSC-funded providers;
- employers as strategic partners, in which there is sustained interaction between employers and the planners and providers of learning.

The report gives most attention to the second of these - employer as a consumer (or customer).

The report also refers to the role of government and funding agencies:

- Sector skills bodies, employer organisations and trade unions should work to encourage employer engagement;
- The introduction of explicit targets at sector/regional level should help to promote employer engagement from a marginal activity to a key part of providers’ development plans;
- There should also be a move to develop funding arrangements to support employer engagement that recognise that the early stages of building relationships with employers can be potentially resource-intensive, with little prospect of immediate commercial return and that accept the need for risk.

**Findings relevant to improvement****Employers as customers**

The notion of employers as customers – analogous to the approach taken with individual learners – should be embedded in providers’ mission and purpose.

## Item no: 16 *Continued*

The principles of successful employer engagement also include:

- an identified point of contact with knowledge of their business;
- providing training that is relevant to business needs;
- delivering cost-effective provision;
- rapid response to requests and queries;
- regular updates and feedback on the training and development of their staff;
- minimum disruption to work patterns;
- flexibility of delivery, assessment and qualifications;
- high quality of both interaction with an employer and delivery of programmes by developing first-rate teaching by expert staff, and acquiring appropriate equipment and accommodation;
- simple administrative processes that involve the employer.

Providers should offer a dedicated service for employers seeking to accredit their in-company learning schemes.

Participation in apprenticeship training might also be improved by:

- customised provision which meets specific business needs;
- taking provision to, or near, the workplace;
- learning workshops in the workplace;
- explicitly relating the training offered to the particular company's success.

In relation to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) providers should:

- emphasise business support, rather than formal learning;
- develop capacity for informal as well as more formal learning;
- consider collaborative solutions to training;
- acknowledge the effort needed to engage employers in workforce development.

### **Developing a responsive system**

In order to develop a responsive system, providers should aim to:

- create appropriate databases to allow a single checkpoint for contact history and company profile;
- enhance management information systems (MIS) to track employer engagement activity across the provider;
- embed an employer-related strand in staff development programmes;
- create explicit targets for employer engagement as part of

## Item no: 16 *Continued*

the LSC planning process;

- develop a policy on the costing and pricing of provision for companies (including provision of support);
- implement a system of regularly updated surveys of employer need and satisfaction (analogous to existing learner and staff surveys);
- set up a 'reception system' such as a dedicated helpline and contact point.

The key to success in engaging employers in work based learning lies in cultivating a positive attitude towards involving employers throughout organisations. This means:

- adopting a corporate approach, by making it the job of every trainer to help build relationships with employers;
- seeking openings to develop new learning opportunities; marketing the benefits of apprenticeships to employers.

Providers should enable companies to carry out problem solving and R&D activity, which may result in a need for further training and development.

### **Partnership working**

A network approach, where partners providers are linked via specialisms would provide a focal point for employers or other key players and provide a mechanism that would better allow Sector Skills Councils to closely liaise with providers in their work on determining sector needs and competencies.

Link: [www.lsneducation.org.uk/user/order.aspx?code=052201](http://www.lsneducation.org.uk/user/order.aspx?code=052201)

## Improving practice

**Item no:** 17

**Reference type:**  
Research report

**Author:**  
Confederation of  
British Industry (CBI)

**Year:** 2009

**Title:**  
Reaching further:  
workforce development  
through employer-FE  
college partnership

**Place of publication:** London

**Publisher:** CBI

**Commissioning body:**  
Learning and Skills  
Improvement Service

### Notes:

The report was commissioned in the context of the UK requiring a more highly skilled workforce in the face of global competition. Colleges are identified as a major source of training, many with strong links to employers. The report highlights examples of good practice where colleges and employers work together, with messages for successful working for both employers and colleges. The report looks at: the drive to improve skills in the economy; the degree to which employer-college partnerships are already working; the key themes emerging from these; and, through case studies, detailed examples of good practice.

### Findings relevant to improvement

#### The college offering

- If employer engagement is a major strategy for a college, it should permeate all its activities
- Employers need to be 'primary clients' with processes to support that
- Marketing is key to successful engagement
- Repeat business is crucial, so customer satisfaction is as well
- Establishing a reputation for expertise is of major usefulness
- Dialogue must be based on employers' skills needs and conducted in business language
- Needs must be interpreted to produce effective and relevant training programmes

#### College structures and staffing

Colleges should:

- Create a single point of contact – including for their training broker role.
- Create a whole college approach to employer engagement.
- Incentivise their staff in well-thought through ways in relation to employer engagement.
- Maintain constant flexibility for training delivery.
- Establish explicit service standards, 'unique selling points' and the right staff in place.
- Have flexible modes of delivery (including location).
- Establish alliances with other training providers and a referral network.

**Item no: 17** *Continued*

**Managing the client interface through:**

- Creative use of public funding.
- Establishing positive outcomes and review meetings for them.
- Picking up new practices to improve their operations.

**Action by employers**

- FE colleges are much more responsive than previously but employers must ensure they clearly understand employers' needs.
- Employers must be active partners in employer-college partnerships to get effective and relevant training.

Link: <http://www.cbi.org.uk/pdf/20090121-CBI-Reaching-Further.pdf>

**Item no: 18**

**Reference type:**

Research report

**Author:** Collinson D. (ed.)

**Year:** 2008

**Title:**

Leading employer engagement

**Place of publication:**

Lancaster

**Publisher:** CEL

**Commissioning body:** CEL

**Notes:**

This report, whose content is paraphrased in the following notes, presents four pieces of research about the role of leadership in effective employer engagement. The four papers demonstrate the growing importance of employer engagement for the sector generally and for FE colleges more particularly. The first, from Highlands College, Jersey, explores four case studies of employer engagement in different curriculum areas. The study shows that, whilst distributed leadership was typically used to maintain the relationships with different employers, when step changes were needed, the college Principal adopted a more “hands on” and strategic approach to leadership.

The second, from Stockton Riverside College, suggests that flexibility and cost remain potential barriers to employers in undertaking training. Emphasising that employers tend to receive and respond to marketing and engagement in a number of ways it is argued that FE leadership should ensure that marketing and engagement activities are primarily concerned with furnishing employers with relevant information that will best inform investment decisions in skills and training.

The third, from Wigan and Leigh College, explores how a large general FE college can most effectively respond to the needs of employers. It suggests that, whilst the college has made a significant impact in this area, certain restraints and tensions limit the effectiveness of employer responsiveness. In particular, some of these obstacles are classified as “perceptions gaps” and ways of overcoming them are proposed.

**Item no: 18** *Continued*

Finally, research by Hackney Community College suggests that work-based learning at Hackney Community College is enabling learners to develop their skills base. This research project found that the input from tutors and employers was a key factor in enabling learners to integrate and successfully employ Key Skills into their employment. The researchers highlight a number of unresolved issues around contractual arrangements and equality and diversity practices. They argue that these could be resolved through training for employers to prepare them for working with learners from a range of backgrounds, experiences and attitudes.

**Findings relevant to improvement**

- ‘Distributed’ leadership at curriculum area level can develop and maintain good relationships and levels of engagement with employers; but learning providers need to consider a more strategic approach as ‘step changes’ in employer engagement are increasingly required.
- Strategic leaders should ensure that marketing and engagement activities focus primarily on providing employers with relevant information so that they can make the best and most informed decisions about investment in skills training.
- Restraints and tensions can limit employer engagement; in particular, learning providers need to address employers’ ‘perception gaps’, establishing baselines for customer satisfaction and how to measure impact of training delivery on employers’ businesses.
- Input from tutors and employers is crucial in enabling learners integrate and develop their skills in the workplace.
- Employers can themselves need ‘training’ in equality and diversity principles and practice to prepare them for working with diverse groups of learners.

Link: <http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/files/vol7.pdf>

**Item no: 19**

**Reference type:**

Research report

**Author:**

Learning and Skills Network

**Year:** 2008

**Title:**

Effective Practice in Employer Engagement

**Place of publication:**

web based only

**Publisher:**

Quality Improvement Agency

**Notes:**

The report sets out findings from research into effective practice in employer engagement. It is intended to identify and facilitate sharing of good practice, and to inform the development of a Framework for Good Practice in employer engagement on which the then DfES had asked QIA to lead.

The research comprised a literature review followed by a small number of detailed case studies of providers. Providers were invited to apply to be case studies, and then selected on the basis that they demonstrated excellence in employer engagement as identified through the literature review. Findings from both research strands were analysed together, with key messages to inform the transfer of effective practice identified.



## Item no: 19 *Continued*

Overall, research shows that providers are generally successful at:

- Raising the profile and extent of employer facing work in their institutions;
- Providing training matched to the business needs of the employer;
- Providing reliable communication channels with employers, backed by appropriate systems for managing their relationships;
- Helping employers attain public subsidy for training undertaken;
- Delivering training in a flexible way that minimises the disturbance to the employer's business.

More development is needed to ensure that providers:

- Draw their non-apprenticeship employer-facing work into a rigorous quality assurance system;
- Develop ways to adequately meet the training requirements of SMEs;
- Support employers through services other than training, for example, with assistance for product development;
- Develop a whole organisational approach to employer responsiveness.

### **Findings relevant to improvement**

#### **Improvement is achieved with:**

##### **Employer Focus**

- Employer engagement is explicitly recognised as an important activity throughout the provider through its inclusion in the mission statement, strategic objectives, planning targets and management structure.
- The provider's training portfolio is driven by employer or labour market needs.

##### **Marketing**

The provider has a marketing function aligned with the needs of effective employer engagement. Areas in marketing that may need attention are suggested as:

- Labour market intelligence. A detailed knowledge of the national, regional and local skills needs and likely business developments;
- Business understanding. An awareness of the business needs of each employer and a commitment to furthering these needs;
- Reliable and effective communication channels. Employers have provider contacts that are consistent, understand the employer's business, and have dependable administration support systems;

## Item no: 19 *Continued*

- Comprehensive management of contacts with employers. All interactions with employers are centrally logged and this information is available to all relevant parties and used for planning and marketing purposes.

### Related Services

- A high quality training needs analysis service is provided to employers;
- Employers are steered through the complexities of the funding and qualification requirements to ensure that training is provided at reasonable cost and is appropriate to the employer's business needs.

### Provision

- The provider is able to provide training promptly in response to identified need;
- Training is provided in a way that minimises disturbance to the employer's business. This means the provider routinely demonstrates flexibility in when, where, and how the training is delivered;
- The provider ensures that all trainees receive initial assessment and guidance that ensures the benefits of training to them and their employers is maximised.

### Resources

- The trainers and assessors used are experts in their field and able to interact effectively with employers and their employees;
- The physical resources employed for the training are appropriate to a high quality training experience.

### Quality Assurance and Improvement

- All training is carefully evaluated and included in rigorous quality assurance arrangements;
- The provider's internal structures enable information and good practice relating to employer engagement to be disseminated effectively.

### Other issues

- There are advantages to providers and employers in forming networks and partnerships in order to better satisfy training needs;
- There are benefits to providers maintaining a specific scope for their employer engagement activities.

Link: <http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/page.aspx?o=197110>

**Item no: 20**

**Reference type:**  
Research report

**Author:**  
ORC International

**Year: 2008**

**Title:**  
Assessing the reasons  
for improvements in  
Apprenticeships completion

**Place of publication:** Coventry

**Publisher:**  
Quality Improvement Agency

**Notes:**

Apprenticeships are seen by Government as a key route into employment for young people and an important mechanism for addressing the UK's skills gap. There has been an increase in the take-up of apprenticeships over recent years, and completion rates for Apprenticeships have risen over the past two years from under one third to just over 60%. While this is a significant improvement on previous performance, completion rates remain fairly low and improving these remains a key issue for the Ministerial Steering Group for Apprenticeships. This report sets out findings from research into how providers have increased Apprenticeship completion rates.

This research is based on case studies of 18 providers that have showed improved completion rates, focusing on sectors that had showed the lowest apprenticeship completion rates in 2005/06. Each case study involved interviews with senior representatives at the provider, as well as learners and employers.

Findings suggest that it is difficult to identify a single main reason for increasing completion rates and a combination of interrelated factors is likely to be responsible for the improvements. A combination of external and internal factors was thought to have contributed to the improvement. The former included changes to the policy and funding environment and the latter were changes implemented by the provider. The research therefore focused on these internal changes, which were generally implemented in the context of wider programme re-organisation or re-structuring. All of these changes benefitted from one or more of the following:

- Senior management commitment/buy in;
- Self assessment of strengths and weaknesses;
- Strategic planning and detailed action planning to address weaknesses;
- Team working to implement change.

Effective communication and collaboration between provider, employer and learner is central to success, as is a wholehearted commitment to the value of Apprenticeships by all concerned.

The main actions thought to have contributed to improved completion rates are summarised below.

**Findings relevant to improvement**

**Provision of consistent information throughout recruitment**

- Information communicated to learners prior to enrolment and during induction helped to set realistic expectations.

### **Extension of quality management and assurance systems**

- After auditing and observing practices, managers focused on improving quality through staff recruitment, standardising practice, raising qualification levels and CPD;
- Systems to identify Apprentices at risk of dropping out and to provide additional targeted support were introduced or improved.

### **Restructuring programmes, re-ordering and integrating elements of Frameworks**

- Providers made changes to the way the programme was delivered in order to better suit the needs of learners and employers. One provider changed the programme from day release to block release following feedback from an employer;
- Key skills were integrated to ensure they had relevance to the occupational sector and moved to the beginning of programmes to develop the skills Apprentices needed to do their job.

### **Employer involvement**

- Providers involved the employer more in Apprenticeship delivery and the employers felt greater responsibility towards delivering the programme;
- Providers adopted a broader approach to employer involvement with tripartite working between the college, the learner and the employer.

### **Staff recruitment, qualifications and development**

More staff time was dedicated to identify issues for learners that may affect retention, progress and completion, in both provider and work place settings.

### **Clear learner-centred ethos and approach**

- Programmes were re-organised to strengthen their focus on learner engagement and progression, such as offering a greater variety of types of sessions at different times of the day to promote attendance;
- Efforts were made to build professional relationships with learners, although often through informal conversations so that learners might feel more comfortable if they wanted to raise something.

Link: [http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/pdf/94036-Final%20Summary%20RptWeb\\_re\\_1.0\\_20080103.pdf](http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/pdf/94036-Final%20Summary%20RptWeb_re_1.0_20080103.pdf)

**Item no: 21****Reference type:**

Research report

**Author:** York Consulting**Year:** 2008**Title:**National Employer Service  
– Effective Practice Research**Place of publication:** Coventry**Publisher:**

Quality Improvement Agency

**Notes:**

This report sets out findings from research to identify and explore effective practice in the training programmes and strategies of employers engaged with the National Employer Service (NES), a discrete unit within the Learning and Skills Council National Office that provides skills solutions for large national companies.

Research comprised interviews with a range of managers, employers and employees of organisations identified by NES as having effective and/or innovative practice. The aspects of good practice that can help shed light on employers' needs and effective delivery of skills provision in the workplace are summarised below.

**Findings relevant to improvement****Employer investment in up-skilling their workforce**

In some cases, employers had carried out research or needs analysis to ensure training offered would help meet current and projected business needs.

- In one case, estimated cost savings due to improved retention as a result of training had been estimated;
- In another case, the detailed Apprenticeship Training Annual Plan, produced by the Training Unit, is now included in forward resource planning within the company as a whole. This employer felt their planning ensured they realised real added value from government subsidised training

A small number of employers highlighted the importance of embedding assessment and provision of key skills within training offered.

**Tailored and flexible learning**

Many employers opted for in-house delivery of learning programmes – including Apprenticeships – which was found to be effective for a number of reasons, including that:

- Programmes can be tailored to meet specific business needs, in terms of both content and location of learning. Some employers want totally bespoke programmes, whereas others want to add small elements to existing provision available;
- Learners can apply training directly in the particular employment environment, aligning off job practical learning with on job realities;
- The company culture can be promoted through training;

## Item no: 21 *Continued*

- Standardisation of resources and content can be implemented and controlled centrally by the employer in order to encourage consistent delivery across multiple sites. One large employer, with many sites, has set up a dedicated 'Academy' as a virtual function to oversee all learning and development across the company.

In-house assessment was preferred by some employers. Benefits cited included: retaining quality and control over the assessment process to ensure it meets the company's needs; appointing internal assessors who employers can be confident know requirements of the job; and flexibility to carry out assessments at a time and location to fit the company's needs.

Online recruitment systems and online learning resources help encourage flexible learning outside of allocated training hours. One employer recently introduced an online portfolio system to allow their employees – who are mobile and not office based – remote access to VQ assessment evidence. However, online learning is primarily used to support face-to-face learning.

### **Embedding a culture of training**

Many employers were found to have a culture of training embedded throughout the organisation.

- Clear career paths were supported with continued training and personal development;
- Some employers thought that attitudes across management and employees had become much more positive about training as they saw its benefits being realised;
- The value of receiving an external qualification through the Apprenticeship programme was considered important.

### **Effective recruitment and clear progression routes**

- Investing in effective recruitment processes can help increase retention of staff and completion of training;
- Clearly setting out the benefits of training and possibilities for promotion that it will afford can help encourage participation and completion.

### **Relationship with NES and with training providers**

Employers cited strong relationships with local training providers and NES as important for effective and tailored provision to meet their needs.

### **Effective information provision and support of learners**

Some employers established formal and informal support for learners. Examples include:

- Line managers who are supportive of the learning;

**Item no: 21** *Continued*

- Allocating a ‘buddy’ or mentor, who is typically in a similar role as the learner rather than management;
- Mentoring the new trainee in their workplace for a set period following completion of their training;
- Team building weeks to develop morale.

Continuous assessment and two way feedback was identified as effective for keeping learners motivated and also identifying ways to improve training.

Link: [http://excellence.qia.org.uk/pdf/Effective%20Practice%20Summary\\_final\\_v1.0\\_20080822.pdf](http://excellence.qia.org.uk/pdf/Effective%20Practice%20Summary_final_v1.0_20080822.pdf)

**Item no: 22**

**Reference type:**

Research report

**Author:**

Gillard K., Wallace A.  
and Wolczuk R.

**Year:** 2007

**Title:**

Employer Responsiveness:  
A learning journey

**Place of publication:** London

**Publisher:** LSDA

**Commissioning body:** LSDA

**Notes:**

This research builds on the good practice guide, *Securing quality in employer engagement: a health check for colleges* (item 15). It re-examines findings from the health-check’s trial across 28 colleges, focusing on development priorities and differing strategies. It also reports on case study visits to three of the providers. These visits were intended to explore whether and how providers had used the health check, looking at ‘distance travelled’ in terms of employer responsiveness.

The report is intended to raise awareness of, and promote good practice in, employer responsiveness. It notes that definitions of ‘employer engagement’ and ‘responsiveness’ are not always consistent and may have changed since they were used in the health check’s original trial.

The report suggests that tools such as the ‘health check’ do help providers assess the effectiveness of strategies and practice, and plan for quality improvement. It suggests that such tools are especially helpful for areas such as employer responsiveness, which require a whole organisation approach to implement successful change. Findings from the health check’s trial showed that many providers identified development needs in relation to setting targets and monitoring employer engagement activities.

The research asserts that there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to securing quality in employer responsiveness. Strategies and processes must be developed in line with the provider’s culture and wider strategic objectives. Providers have successfully reached and responded to employers in an increasing variety of ways such as free training needs analysis, personal contacts and direct marketing. Feedback is being regularly collected from providers, and used to inform continued programme development. The case studies together suggest some broad success factors and messages for improvement

## **Findings relevant to improvement**

### **Strategy and planning**

Strategic planning should ensure that employer engagement activities are focused on sector priorities and local needs, as identified through labour market intelligence (LMI) or other relevant data. Planning should be based on thorough market analysis in order to ensure that:

- Sufficient resources are allocated to support planned developments, in infrastructure, marketing and networking, management information, monitoring and delivery of provision;
- Realistic and devolved targets are set and regularly monitored and updated;
- Local responsibility and accountability is increased.

Good financial management should lead to proactive income generation and the diversification of funding sources.

### **Staffing and staff development**

Employer engagement activities should be led by employer facing senior and middle management posts with expertise in active marketing; networking and partnership building; business/ industry culture and responsive training provision.

A culture of encouraging enterprise and managed risk taking should be fostered across the provider. Creative and innovative ideas and people should be valued and supported. Staff should be encouraged to develop knowledge of local markets and identify opportunities for synergy between the needs, aims and expertise of providers, employers and other agencies.

### **Self assessment and quality improvement**

Providers should aim to adopt a dual approach to quality that combines:

- 'traditional' further education quality management and improvement, characterised by rigorous self-assessment and targeted planning at all levels, with regular monitoring and sharp target setting; and
- more market-led and employer-facing attitudes and measures, involving responsiveness, flexibility, customer involvement and feedback.

### **Reaching employers and designing programmes**

Providers need to be a 'business', adopting appropriate branding, image, enterprise and market positioning.

Providers should not try and satisfy all employer needs should but offer expert services and referral.



**Item no: 22** *Continued*

**Network, partnerships and collaboration**

Providers should take up opportunities for networking and partnership working, with other providers, employers and other agencies. These provide an opportunity to share good practice and identify employer needs.

Link: <http://excellence.qia.org.uk/page.aspx?o=workingwithemployersresources>

**Item no: 23**

**Reference type:**

Research report

**Author:** Kelly S.

**Year:** 2007

**Title:**

Employee engagement in the further education sector

**Place of publication:**

Lancaster

**Publisher:** CEL

**Commissioning body:** CEL

**Notes:**

This is the report of a six month research project taking a historical perspective on engaging employers, arguing that this is something that colleges have a track record of doing. Perceptions of FE colleges' poor "responsiveness" to employers are analysed in interviews with heads of business development for eight colleges in the North West of England. There are further interviews with FE college based NVQ assessors, and Train to Gain contacts managers. Two employers were also interviewed as well as representatives from the local Learning and Skills Council.

The report provides a historical sweep of FE colleges and employer engagement in the 1980s and 1990s. It contends that working with employers is a traditional and necessary part of the mission of FE to engage with the local community.

It looks at barriers to engaging employers in the form of a case study of a college in a small rural market town which focused on employer engagement as a means of keeping the college financially independent. A newly employed Business and Innovation Manager set up an innovation unit and was able to seek out unique employer engagement opportunities. The Innovation Unit was able to take on training from any industrial sector, no matter how specialised, and directly employ the number of assessors required to deliver the relevant qualifications.

Another case study outlines cross-college employer engagement in a large college on the outskirts of a large city which has always engaged with employers. This college's business unit was contractually obliged to deploy existing lecturing staff to conduct on and off site assessment work as part of their teaching load. This meant that assessment had to take place on college premises which was not particularly successful. A college-based company was created to deal specifically with employers and deliver training solutions to companies and organisations. However this meant that although the "company" was dealing with employers, it could not satisfy all of their requirements because the expertise was back in the college itself.

**Item no: 23** *Continued*

The business unit put together a model to be a cross college business support team, dealing with employers, but drawing delivery from specialists back in the main college provision. Each college faculty became responsible for its own delivery to employers.

Findings relevant to improvement

- Learning providers need to build on historical and current relationships with employers and develop successful models of engagement according to their unique circumstances. One size does not fit all.

**Item no: 24**

**Reference type:**

Evaluation report

**Author:** Ofsted

**Year:** 2008

**Title:**

The impact of Train to Gain on skills in employment

**Place of publication:** London

**Publisher:** Ofsted

**Commissioning body:** Ofsted

**Notes:**

This survey report evaluates the impact of provision funded by Train to Gain on the skills and qualifications held by adult employees in England. Programmes funded by Train to Gain are available for adults who do not hold level 2 qualifications or who have literacy or numeracy skills needs. This survey assessed the extent to which skills were improved, the quality of provision funded by Train to Gain, and the leadership and management of that provision.

The method used is as follows: from September 2007 to April 2008 a team from Ofsted visited 48 providers of training funded by Train to Gain and interviewed 200 of their staff. They visited 74 employers to interview 104 workplace supervisors and 157 employees on programmes funded by Train to Gain. Inspectors looked at documents related to employees' programmes and progress and sampled their portfolios of evidence. They analysed inspection reports for 97 providers of Train to Gain. The providers and reports were selected from the nine Learning and Skills Council (LSC) regions in England and included colleges, work-based learning providers and consortia.

The key findings are:

- Almost all the employees surveyed made improvements to their knowledge, understanding, motivation, teamwork, self-confidence and self-esteem.
- The programmes surveyed were effective in raising qualification levels among the workforce. However they did not make substantial improvements to employees' technical or practical skills unless they progressed to work and training at level 3.
- Around three quarters of the providers contributing data to the survey reported qualification success rates of over 70% for employees on Train to Gain programmes. However, methods for calculating success rates varied.

## Item no: 24 *Continued*

- Over three quarters of the providers adopted particularly flexible and responsive arrangements for the training and assessment of employees; they expanded the training methods and qualifications they offered to meet a diverse range of employer needs.
- Over three quarters of the employers visited identified benefits such as reduced staff turnover, improved working practices or understanding of health and safety as a result of participation in the programme.
- Insufficient skills for life provision was offered by providers or taken up by employers and employees. Few providers had specialist staff to offer effective skills for life training.
- Employers or supervisors were not sufficiently involved in employees' programmes of training or assessment. Employees were not encouraged to take sufficient responsibility for their own development or assessment, nor were they provided with sufficient information to guide their future study.
- The providers surveyed had responded well to the demands posed by Train to Gain and had quickly set up systems for its promotion, delivery and quality assurance.
- Although almost all the employers were pleased with the training and assessment their staff had received and were keen to participate, the survey found little evidence that the programme was driving up the demand for training among employers.
- Eighteen providers supplied detailed data on the recruitment of participants on Train to Gain programmes. These showed that only 5% of participants came from employers who had been referred by the brokerage service. Almost all of the employers were committed to training, although they also met "hard to reach" criteria.
- For around half of the employers, the eligibility criteria were a barrier. They did not allow sufficient access to provision for employees who had a level 2 qualification in an unrelated area, or focused too narrowly on the completion of a full award.
- Unless well established membership of a consortium added little value to the delivery of provision and increased levels of bureaucracy for providers.

The report makes recommendations for DIUS, for DIUS and its agencies, for the LSC and for providers.

### **Findings relevant to improvement**

#### **Learning providers should:**

- Develop and implement strategies for promoting skills for life training to employers and for developing skills for life among employees;

**Item no: 24** *Continued*

- Make better use of initial assessment to plan training programmes for employees;
- Involve employees and employers more fully in training and assessment;
- Provide, or direct, employees to additional information and advice on training and development at the start of, during, and on completion of their programmes;
- Adopt flexible and responsive approaches and systems for addressing Train to Gain and any future changes to it.

Link: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Documents-by-type/Thematic-reports/The-impact-of-Train-to-Gain-on-skills-in-employment>

**Item no: 25**

**Reference type:**  
Guidance handbook

**Author:** Cox P.

**Year:** 2005

**Title:**  
Securing quality in  
employer engagement

**Place of publication:** London

**Publisher:** LSDA

**Commissioning body:** LSDA

**Notes:**

This 'health check' is a self-assessment tool for reviewing 'employer engagement' activities. It is primarily intended for use by providers, allowing them to identify areas that are working well and those that are in need of improvement in relation to employer engagement. The tool was developed as part of the LSC funded Support for Success programme in the light of growing government priorities for meeting employer skills' needs. The health check was 'piloted' with 28 colleges and refined prior to publication.

The health check sets out a number of 'quality statements' under nine headings relating to specific aspects policy and practice in employer engagement. Against each quality statement, providers are asked to: identify good practice; describe any development needs; and rate the scale of the development need along a five-point scale. The final section asks the provider to draw on evidence they have inputted throughout the check in order to make overall judgements on the strength of current provision in relation to employer engagement, identifying areas for improvement and barriers to doing so.

Since being developed, the health-check tool has been used by individual providers for college wide self-assessment processes, to support college planning, to benchmark practices against other providers and for staff development purposes. The categories identified in the health check have also informed draft criteria for the LSC's *New Standard for Employer Responsiveness and Vocational* awards. The findings emerging from the use of the health check to survey college practice are reported on in a sister publication (item 16).

## **Findings relevant to improvement**

### **Mission and strategy**

Employer engagement should be embedded across the whole provider. The provider's mission and strategy should explicitly address local skills needs as well as supporting the training and development needs of employers. Curriculum and programme development should be focused on meeting these needs and ensuring the 'work-readiness' of learners. In addition, the college should make systematic use of labour market information for planning purposes.

### **Collaborative development**

Providers should work in partnership with each other, and other relevant agencies, to promote employer engagement and share good practice. In addition, good practice should be shared within the college.

### **Employability and work-readiness of learners**

Providers should directly involve employers in the design, development and delivery of programmes. They should offer a broad and accessible vocational curriculum, work-based routes to learning and purposeful work experience. Learners' support and guidance should be oriented to the world of work.

### **Direct services to employers**

Providers should aim to offer a wide range of relevant support and provision to employers, potentially including: identification of training needs; Modern Apprenticeships; bespoke courses to meet specific requirements; accreditation of company learning schemes; research and product development services; problem-solving and innovation services; and networks to support the needs of SMEs.

### **Target setting**

Providers should have relevant targets associated with employer engagement activities including those relating to developing direct services and increasing the employability of learners. Employer engagement targets should be informed by the overall strategy of the college and the objectives of the LSC, Regional Development Agency, Sector Skills Councils and other relevant agencies.

### **Service standards**

Providers should set quality standards in relation to all employer engagement activities, including direct services and assuring employability of learners. There should be a formal process for dealing with employer enquiries and complaints, and employers should be regarded as customers in the same way as learners.

**Item no: 25** *Continued*

**Performance monitoring and improvement**

Providers should effectively monitor employer engagement activities, collecting data on the needs and satisfaction levels of employers and monitoring against performance targets. Employers should be informed of the outcomes of this monitoring.

**Information management**

Management Information Systems should have the capacity to collect and process data on work with employers, holding a single data record for each employer. Staff should be aware of the importance of collecting data on their work with employers.

**Staffing and other resources**

Providers should aim to ‘embed’ the ethos of employer engagement across staff and professional development. For instance, capabilities in working with employers should be addressed in recruitment. Staff should be encouraged to maintain close contact and relationships with employers and have opportunities for work placements and secondments. In addition funding streams should be available and visible for supporting and promoting employer engagement.

Link: <https://www.lseducation.org.uk/user/order.aspx?code=041753&src=XOWEB>

**Item no: 26**

**Reference type:**

Guidance handbook

**Author:** Hughes M.

**Year:** 2003

**Title:**

Successful engagement:  
Guidance for colleges and  
providers on effective  
employer engagement in  
post-16 learning

**Place of publication:** London

**Publisher:** LSDA

**Commissioning body:** LSC

**Notes:**

This report was written to support the ‘Success for All’ initiative. It has three sections. The first gives the rationale for colleges and providers engaging more closely with employers. The second section discusses implications for the further education sector, identifying changes required to better meet employer needs, and providing advice on planning for responsiveness. It provides a checklist of questions to consider when planning for employer engagement. The third gives examples of employer engagement related to named providers and employers. The examples are grouped under themes and for each theme, the report suggests the key issues raised by the example; how these could be taken further; what performance indicators the providers might use to measure effectiveness or set targets related to employer engagement; and particular good practice points.

## Findings relevant to improvement

### Developing employer-responsive colleges and providers.

Employer engagement must permeate mainstream activities, and this has implications for mission, leadership and systems. Points to consider when planning for employer engagement are:

- developing a mission that recognises employers as customers, analogous to the approach taken with individual students;
- the creation of appropriate databases, allowing a single checkpoint on contact history, and the nature of the company;
- the enhancement of management information systems (MIS) to provide timely and ongoing data on the extent and type of employer engagement;
- an employer-related strand to staff development programmes;
- a policy on the costing and pricing of provision for companies (including provision of support);
- a system of regularly updated surveys of employer need and satisfaction (analogous to existing learner and staff surveys);
- a ‘reception’ system such as a dedicated helpline and contact point.

### Supply side

Drawing on LSDA research into the ‘College for Business’ (item 9) an effective supply side needs to provide:

- a gateway to the workplace – where initial knowledge and skills will be developed;
- adaptation and updating – where the current workforce will be provided with training to acquire new processes and helped to adapt to new technologies.

Link: [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?\\_nfpb=true&\\_ERICExtSearch\\_SearchValue\\_0=ED480447&\\_ERICExtSearch\\_SearchType\\_0=no&accno=ED480447](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED480447&_ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED480447)

## Views of employers

**Item no:** 27

**Reference type:**

Research report

**Author:** CBI

**Year:** 2008

**Title:** Taking stock:

CBI education and skills  
survey 2008

**Place of publication:** London

**Publisher:** Edexcel

**Commissioning body:** CBI

### Notes:

The CBI conducted its first education and skills survey and published it in 2008. There were 735 respondents – a response rate of 7.6%. The report's findings focus in particular on policy implications from the Research, and findings relate to the following areas:

- Getting the basics right (remains a priority);
- Apprenticeship reform;
- STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) skills;
- Leadership and management;
- Languages;
- Qualifications reformation to meet business needs;
- Government funding and assistance for training;
- Effective education-to-business links, to deliver for businesses and the community.

### Findings relevant to improvement

Learning providers need to take stock of the findings of this important and authoritative survey by addressing the findings over which they can have some influence and in particular:

- Listening carefully to the specific needs of employers and responding accurately to them
- Focusing on the effective delivery of basic skills for employees, including in the workplace and by innovative methods
- Focusing on other specialised skills needs of employees and developing effective ways of meeting them
- Where possible, developing the ability to respond to STEM shortages in partnership with HEIs
- Developing the capacity to deliver required foreign language skills
- Developing effective business links
- Working with qualification awarding bodies to deliver appropriate qualifications in terms of content, size, unitisation, and accreditation and through flexible, modular and innovative delivery, including by on-line means.

Link: <http://www.cbi.org.uk/pdf/eduskills0408.pdf>



**Item no: 28****Reference type:**

Research report

**Author:**

Hughes M. and Smeaton B.

**Year: 2006****Title:**

Exploring employers' perceptions of employer engagement

**Place of publication:** London**Publisher:** LSN**Commissioning body:**

Department of Education and Skills (DfES)

**Notes:**

The report describes the research into the expectations of employers, which confirmed principles of responsive provision derived from an earlier literature review. A framework for self assessment and development planning was produced, based on these principles, which colleges used to compare the service they were providing with the expectations of employers and to consider how to improve. Pairs of providers then worked in a peer evaluation exercise which providers considered most valuable. The self-assessment framework, which could be a useful tool for other providers aiming to improve their performance, is given in the report.

The research explored with employers what they can reasonably expect a training organisation to provide and developed the guiding principles for effective employer engagement described in Item 7. Action by Government and the LSC needed to support employer engagement is also described.

**Findings relevant to improvement****Action by providers to improve employer engagement**

Providers should:

- be more proactive in contacting employers;
- be more aware of employers' and trainees' needs;
- match study modes and opportunities to suit commitments through offering training in the workplace; distance learning; a larger range of courses (particularly at higher levels);
- provide a more bespoke service;
- improve their marketing, websites and literature;
- provide a forum for consultation through which employers could influence the nature of provision;
- maintain greater continuity in staffing contacts with employers;
- keep staff up to date with latest developments in the industry.

**Action by employers**

Employers could help by:

- giving providers a better understanding of their business and the direction it is moving;
- maintaining more frequent contact with the college; being more aware of what the college can do and what is on offer; making their feelings known to ensure that the service is improved;
- working proactively with the training providers to help their employees succeed in their training by: providing support to staff; ensuring trainees attend training regularly; and reviewing employees have learnt and the impact of this

Link: [www.lsneducation.org.uk/user/order.aspx?code=062675](http://www.lsneducation.org.uk/user/order.aspx?code=062675)

**Item no: 29**

**Reference type:**

Research report

**Author:** National Audit Office

**Year:** 2005

**Title:**

Employers' perspectives  
on improving skills for  
employment

**Place of publication:** London

**Publisher:**

The Stationery Office

**Commissioning body:**

HM Government

**Notes:**

This report sets out findings from research into employers' views on how publicly funded training can be improved and whether it represents value for money. It followed on from publication of *Realising the Potential: A review of the future role of the further education colleges* (Sir Andrew Foster, 2005) and was intended to help inform providers in tailoring provision to help meet the well documented skills gap. However, unlike other research, this work collected evidence and views directly from employers, rather than from intermediary organisations. This was considered important since improving skills for employment – and ensuring employers get what they want – requires employers' co-operation and involvement. The research methodology included: a literature review of relevant policy and research documents; discussions with key stakeholders; visits to seven colleges and 25 employers; a telephone survey of 508 private sector employers; and interviews with representatives from the Sector Skills Council (SSCs).

The report's findings cover the following broad areas: employers' motivations for training; reasons for not taking up publicly-funded training; deadweight; and the role of Sector Skills Councils.

### **Findings relevant to improvement**

#### **Employers want a simple way of getting advice on the best skills training for their staff**

The multiple agencies that exist to provide information and advice on training can be confusing for some employers. Employers want clear routes to appropriate training, and in some cases help in identifying training needs. Many were unaware of what was available and what they might be entitled to. However, they do not want to be flooded with promotional materials and are more likely to trust recommendations from other employers.

Greater co-ordination is needed at sector level in communicating with, and engaging, employers. Such increased collaboration would also benefit providers by reducing duplication and streamlining activity across the sector.

Mechanisms should also be introduced to encourage employers to communicate with each other about their experiences in relation to training, including:

- as part of the National Employer Training Programme, through developing brokers' capacity and profile;
- developing the UK Register of Learning Providers, so that employers can access a publicly available database containing information on all providers in the UK;
- developing the Employers' Guide to Training Providers, which would provide complete information on training that is available. In order to maximise its potential, this could include a facility allowing employers to see feedback from others.

**Employers want training that meets their business needs – they will only invest if they perceive there to be economic benefits.**

To meet employers' needs more effectively, therefore, the further education sector must do more than match employers' skills requirements to available courses. Providers and brokers need to 'add value' by developing cost effective and convenient solutions that properly meet identified needs.

Encouraging 'training partnerships' between large and small employers can lead to in-depth sharing of each others' knowledge base as well as economies of scale and more flexible arrangements for providing training. In addition, brokers should try to increase awareness of Learndirect courses, which have minimal cost for employers, and work to encourage providers to pool skills and strengths so as to come up with tailored and flexible training packages.

**Employers want incentives to train their staff more**

Providers need to ensure that training has clear demonstrable benefits, such as evidence that it will fill local skills gaps. Research and information setting out the advantages of training should be disseminated to employers. Regional Skills Partnerships should help focus funds for selective subsidy of training at level 3 on local and regional skills gaps in areas where employers are sufficiently committed to contribute to costs.

Link: [http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0506/employers\\_perspectives\\_on\\_imp.aspx](http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0506/employers_perspectives_on_imp.aspx)

**Item no: 30**

**Reference type:**

Research report

**Author:**

IFF Research Ltd

**Year: 2005**

**Title:**

Skills for Business 2004:  
survey of employers

**Place of publication:**

South Yorkshire

**Publisher:**

Sector Skills

Development Agency

**Notes:**

This document reports a survey commissioned across the UK to inform the evaluation of the Skills for Business network (SfBn) by providing data on employer engagement with Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), skill challenges and human resource and workforce development practices amongst employers, as an essential context for the operation of the SSDA and SSCs.

13,700 employers were surveyed. The survey contributed to the second phase of the evaluation of the Skills for Business network and builds upon baseline data collected in 2003.

The survey found that employers' awareness of all parts of the SfB network has increased. This increase in awareness is across all sizes of establishments but is higher amongst the larger establishments. However, understanding of the roles of the network has decreased

Establishments that have had dealings with their SSC are relatively satisfied with its activities and most would recommend their SSC if asked. However, half of establishments who are aware of their SSC judge it to have had a positive impact on skills development in the sector.

The most frequently mentioned benefit of training is improved skill levels, followed by improved customer service and improved labour productivity. This suggests that employers recognise the benefits of training to the individual and organisation.

Link: <http://www.ukces.org.uk/upload/pdf/050905-r-research-report-11-exec-Summary.pdf>

Friars House, Manor House Drive  
Coventry CV1 2TE  
t 024 7662 7900  
e enquiries@lsis.org.uk

[www.lsis.org.uk](http://www.lsis.org.uk)