“The Leitch-Foster agenda presents a golden opportunity for colleges to place their work with employers firmly at the centre of their activity and to demonstrate, convincingly and powerfully, their capacity to make a unique contribution to the prosperity and well-being of our nation.”

(Chapman 2006: 33)
Research Publication Notices

Research Reports
Many of the documents in this series are prepublication/preprint articles, which may subsequently appear (part or whole) in peer reviewed journals and books. In most cases they are draft documents, the purpose of which is to foster discussion and debate, prior to publication elsewhere, whilst ideas are still fresh. Further information about the research programme and other papers in this series can also be found at the following websites:

http://www.centreforexcellence.org.uk
or
http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/leadership/cel/

Citation Notice
Citation should conform to normal academic standards. Please use the reference provided or, where a paper has entered into print elsewhere, use normal journal/book citation conventions.

Copyright
The Copyright of all publications on work commissioned by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership is owned by Inspire Learning Ltd, from whom permission should be sought before any materials are reproduced. Short sections of text, not to exceed two paragraphs, may be quoted without explicit permission, provided that full acknowledgement is given.

Centre for Excellence in Leadership
The Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) was launched in October 2003 as a key national agency, but now operates through a charitable trust formed by its operating company on 1 April 2006. CEL’s remit is to foster and support leadership reform, transformation, sustainability and quality improvement in the Learning and Skills Sector. CEL’s Research Programme is sponsored by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) to whom all the results will be reported.

Disclaimer
These projects have been commissioned by, but do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre for Excellence in Leadership.

Contact Details
Centre for Excellence in Leadership
Lancaster University Management School
CEL Research Office, Room B189
Gillow Avenue, Lancaster LA1 4YX

Professor David Collinson
National Research Director
Tel: 01524 593147
Email: d.collinson@lancaster.ac.uk

© CEL – March 2008
Contents

Editorial Introduction 2
David Collinson, National Research Director, CEL

Employer Engagement to Employer Responsiveness: 8
Leadership contrasts
Peter Hubert and Professor Ed Sallis, Highlands College, Jersey

Effective Employer Engagement: How the employer’s voice should 22
best inform methods of engagement and responsiveness
Liz Kennedy and Anthony Horne, Stockton Riverside College

Responding to Employer Needs 38
David Hindley, Wigan and Leigh College

Developing a Strategy for an FE College to Lead in the Development 50
of the Local Workforce Through Work Based Learning
Urmi Joshi and Andry Anastasiou, Hackney Community College

Further Information and Contact Details 71

List of Volumes in the Series 72
Leading Employer Engagement

Editorial Introduction, Professor David Collinson

Introduction

This is the seventh edited collection in the series of CEL volumes designed to showcase research produced by “practitioners” in the Learning and Skills Sector (LSS) on important leadership-related themes. It presents four research reports that raise significant, but under-researched questions about the role of leadership in effective employer engagement. Encouraging greater employer engagement is a central part of the UK Government’s current strategy to increase the knowledge, skills and life chances of 14-19 year olds in full-time education and to up-skill adult learners to a minimum standard by 2020. This strategy includes an emphasis on work based learning for both young people and adults.

As well as widening vocational choices for learners, these reforms are intended to encourage employers to take a more active role in the training of learners by working with colleges in the delivery of programmes and qualifications. The driving vision of these reforms is a commitment to placing the needs and interests of learners and employers at the heart of the system (Kelly 2007). The Foster Review (DfES, 2005), the National Employers Skills Survey (LSC, 2005), the FE White Paper (DfES, 2006) and the Leitch Review (HMT, 2006) all suggest that, in addressing the educational needs of local people and businesses, increased employer engagement is vital for the sector.

Accompanying these policy statements are a series of measures seeking to encourage direct engagement with employers, such as the retraining of teaching staff in specialist areas and the creation of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs), National Skills Academies and ‘Train to Gain’. It is envisaged that these programmes will provide learners with greater career opportunities and life skills, and employers with a more flexible and skilled workforce. As providers of post-16 full and part-time education, foundation level, degree level and vocational qualifications, FE colleges are seen as an important element in this national focus on investing in skills.

Building on earlier research on employer engagement by CEL (Kelly 2007), the LSDA (Hughes and Smeaton 2005), the LSN (2006), and the ACM (Chapman 2006), the papers in this CEL practitioner volume demonstrate the growing importance of employer engagement for the sector generally, and for FE colleges more particularly. In the first report, Peter Hubert and Ed Sallis (Highlands College, Jersey) explore four case studies of employer engagement in different curriculum areas. Their study reveals that, whilst distributed leadership was typically used to maintain the relationships with different employers, when step changes were needed, the Principal adopted a more ‘hands on’ and strategic approach to leadership.
The second report by Liz Kennedy and Anthony Horne (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, they argue 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 report by David Hindley (Wigan & 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, Hindley classifies some of these obstacles as ‘perceptions gaps’ and proposes ways to overcome them.

Finally, research by Urmi Joshi and Andry Anastasiou (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.

The CEL Practitioner Research Programme

These four CEL reports are drawn from the 2007-08 round of research commissioning. In the summer of 2007, the Lancaster research team launched Phase Four of the CEL practitioner research programme with a nation-wide tender process. As in previous years, this tender attracted an enormous response, providing further evidence of the very strong appetite that exists across the LSS to conduct research on the sector, by the sector and for the sector. For the period October 2007 to March 2008, the evaluation panel agreed to fund 35 practitioner research projects, based on the following research themes: Distributed Leadership, Employer Engagement, Equality and Diversity, Leadership Excellence, Leading Quality Improvement, Learner Voice, and Talent Management and Leadership Development.
The CEL practitioner research programme enables practising leaders and managers in the sector to undertake research on highly relevant and topical issues. It is the result of a personal initiative by the chief executive of CEL, Lynne Sedgmore, who was keen to encourage a community of “practitioner scholars” and to provide an opportunity for practising leaders and managers in the sector to engage with research. The main aims of the programme are to:

- support research that critically investigates leadership issues in the LSS,
- provide the sector and stakeholders with evidence-based and theoretically-informed research findings by addressing current issues,
- strengthen networks linking practice, research and policy to build awareness of the importance of practitioners engaging with the research process,
- disseminate research findings as widely as possible and communicate these in ways that are useful to recipients,
- encourage networking between researchers to build a sustainable research community within the LSS.

Since its inception, we have steadily increased year on year the amount of funding allocated to the Practitioner Project Scheme to cope with the large number of applications received through the annual tendering system.

The programme provides individual practitioner-researchers with the opportunity to develop their own original research question, reflect on current practice, and produce research findings that can both shape organisational change and improve future policy and practice. Each project begins with a clear plan to examine a particular research question informed by specific assumptions, methodologies and objectives. Practitioner researchers attend two workshops which provide support and guidance in undertaking the research, analysing the data, and writing-up final reports. The design of each workshop is a mixture of information-giving and network opportunities with space for dialogue and discussion. There is also an opportunity at each event to deal with any dilemmas or issues that may have emerged during the project.

Research is central to CEL’s mission. Concerned to enhance the inter-relationships between research, policy and practice, CEL seeks to increase the impact of research on leadership development and on sector policies and practices. Research impact can occur in numerous ways. By broadening the knowledge base of the sector, research can inform policy construction and implementation. The findings of research may change organizational structures, cultures, resourcing or delivery. More subtly, they might lead to changes in understandings, attitudes or practices (Nutley et al 2003). Hence in many ways, research provides evidence-based knowledge that is useful and usable for those in the LSS.
There are many leadership issues in FE, and in the LSS more broadly, that warrant investigation and analysis. Yet, research in this sector is still very much in its infancy (Hillier and Jameson 2003). This research programme and the series of edited volumes emerging from it enable employees in the sector to develop a research voice, to participate in the setting of research agendas and to define the key themes for leadership. In doing so, practitioners are actively engaged as researchers in the process of knowledge production. This strengthening of a research community in the LSS constitutes an important objective of the CEL research programme.

CEL created the practitioner programme with the intention that research can positively influence the sector and inform CEL’s teaching programmes. Equally, research engagement itself can constitute a learning experience, enhancing researchers’ own understandings and practices. The programme is therefore designed to foster the research-based skills and expertise of staff in the sector. This increased focus on research-based knowledge and experience is particularly relevant at the current time, as the UK government is keen for FE colleges to offer more degree-level/HE programmes.

Underpinning this CEL practitioner research programme is also the view that theory and practice are both very important and often mutually-reinforcing. Much of the debate about research impact focuses on the importance of “evidence-based” perspectives, but sophisticated empirical research should also be theoretically informed. Explicitly or implicitly, theoretical perspectives inform all empirical research (Fox, Martin and Green 2007). Suffice it to say here, that theory and practice are best viewed as inter-related and the CEL research programme seeks to encourage mutually-reinforcing relationships between theory, development, policy and practice.

Since the practitioner scheme began in October 2004, over 100 projects have been funded. In 2007, CEL published five edited volumes of evidence-based practitioner research, as follows:

- Volume 1 - Researching Leadership in the Learning and Skills Sector: By the Sector, On the Sector, For the Sector
- Volume 2 - Developing Middle Leaders
- Volume 3 - Leading Quality Improvement
- Volume 4 - Leadership and the Learner Voice
- Volume 5 - Collaborative Leadership.

To date, over 7,000 copies have been distributed across the sector with Volumes 1 & 4 already having to go to reprint. From the current phase (2007-08), we are now publishing another series of CEL practitioner research volumes.
Feedback received so far from the sector indicates that the CEL Practitioner Research Programme is beginning to have a significant impact, informing practice, influencing leadership development, helping to engage those working in the sector with research and building a sustainable research community. A key aim of the programme has been to disseminate the research findings as widely as possible and to communicate these in ways useful to recipients. Practitioners, stakeholders and policy makers are much more likely to engage with the research if it is relatively easy to digest, useful and practical. Therefore the research is disseminated in comparatively small, readable reports that are designed to facilitate the implementation of evidence based research into practice.

The CEL programme provides practitioner researchers with space to reflect on current practice, to explore how other organisations work and how they could improve their performance as individuals, teams and in organisations. It can also facilitate staff development in the LSS. For example, CEL research publications are being used on leadership and management programmes and as professional development for staff, with some colleges giving accreditation for participation in a research project as part of their CPD. For organisations, the research has encouraged new collaborative partnerships and the sharing of good practice. CEL has found that engaging practitioners with the research process has given the sector a sense of ownership, as well as increasing awareness of the importance of research and how it can influence and improve policy and practice. In these ways, the CEL practitioner research programme is helping to facilitate more reflexive, critical and reflective learning cultures within the LSS.

References


Employer Engagement to Employer Responsiveness: Leadership Contrasts

Peter Hubert and Professor Ed Sallis, Highlands College Jersey

Executive Summary

Leadership in the context of employer engagement was examined through four case studies which explore how four curriculum areas in Highlands College undertake work with employers. The four areas, hairdressing, financial services, Information Technology (IT), and construction and engineering had varied histories of employer engagement and from recently initiated to long term. In the case of hairdressing the relationship was stable and working well; in construction and engineering the Head of Faculty recognised that the relationship was stagnant and was endeavouring to make changes; IT was in the process of establishing relationships and the Jersey Business School had long standing contact with the financial services industry. In the latter two sectors a significant step change was being attempted through the introduction of foundation degrees. The study found that distributed leadership was being used successfully to maintain the relationships with industry and make small incremental changes. However, where step changes were contemplated, in this case the introduction of foundation degrees, it was necessary for the Principal to enact strategic leadership. This not only compressed the timescale for the change but had the additional benefit of enhancing the reputation of the College at a high level in the civic administration of the island.

Introduction

Highlands College situated in Jersey is not directly subject to the influences and changes that the FE sector in the UK experiences. However the island tends to have an education development agenda that substantially mirrors the UK. In an island of full employment, 52% of employers reported lack of skills in applicants as being a reason for having hard to fill vacancies. For those in employment, ‘92% of Jersey employees are considered to be fully proficient in their job role’ (Jersey Employers Skills Survey 2007).
The States of Jersey Strategic Plan’s (2006 – 2011) first commitment is to maintain a strong, successful and sustainable economy. To achieve this it recognises the requirement for ‘tailored educational programmes to develop relevant professional and vocational skills’ (p. 14). The developments initiated by the 2005 Skills Strategy for the Island resulted in the formation in November 2007 of the Skills Executive. This body, comprising representatives of the Department for Economic Development (ED), the Department for Education Sport and Culture (ESC) and the Department for Employment and Social Security (ESS), is supported by Skills Jersey, an employer led group designed to advise the Skills Executive on employers’ skill needs. The intention is to shift training provision so that it becomes led by employer demand rather than the student led provision that dominates the curriculum at Highlands College.

As the sole FE college in Jersey and the major provider of post-16 education training, it was inevitable that the development of a skills agenda for the island would have significant implications for Highlands College. The extent of contact with employers across the College is variable. Contact with some industrial sectors is very long standing, in others regular contact has only come into being relatively recently. In some sectors contact is with only a few companies but where there are regulations governing participation via qualifications, contact is with all organisations in the sector. This industry contact is led by Heads of Faculty, Curriculum Managers or in some cases lecturers largely depending on who possesses the subject expertise associated with an industry. The Principal is generally only involved when special events require visible support from the top of the organisation, e.g., award ceremonies, opening conferences. The exception would be when contact with an industry sector acquires strategic importance for the College.

Against this background, this project examined how leadership within the College was operating in relation to employer engagement, how best to structure employer engagement and listen to employer voice. It was also intended to determine what services employers value from the College, what we are doing well and how the services could be improved.

**Research Framework**

**Leadership**

Attention is drawn by Ogawa and Bossert (1997) to the fact that earlier research into leadership focused on the individual and it is because of this that it has proved to be an elusive quality. They argue that leadership is a quality of the organisation rather than the individual:

> ‘Leadership flows through the networks of roles that comprise organisations. The medium of leadership and the currency of leadership lie in the personal resources of people. Leadership shapes the systems that produce patterns of interaction and the meaning that other participants attach to organisational events.’
Ogawa and Bossert (1997) contend that from an institutional perspective ‘leadership must affect more than individuals’ actions; it must influence the system in which actions occur’ to enhance the organisation’s ability to survive. They also recognised that whereas senior managers developed formal structures to assist the organisation in coping with its environment, individuals ‘at the technical level develop informal structures to co-ordinate work activities’. Therefore, an individual does not possess leadership as a consequence of their role, but through the network of relationships they maintain with other individuals. Certain traits are often described as being characteristic of leadership but Ogawa and Bossert assert that the traits should be considered as resources that a leader can deploy to exert influence.

Lumby (2003) in comparing general further education colleges (GFEC) and sixth form colleges argues that leadership is ‘partly constructed by context’. In the case of GFECs the contextual factors proposed include a diverse student population, a competitive environment, lack of long term stability in the organisational structure, institutional size and a diverse and changing curriculum. GFEC middle managers exert leadership by exercising the power of choice to act and hence move things in a particular direction. Lumby concludes that it is the conflation of action by these individuals that contributes to the leadership of the institution. The exercise of leadership to achieve objectives by individuals with positions of responsibility, but little authority because of their position in the formal structure at Highlands College, was highlighted by Hubert (1999).

Hartley (2002) discusses the concept of community leadership in the context of a public body in relation to the agencies it works with where it is striving to give voice to and address the needs of the community. Hartley acknowledges the part individuals play in the leadership of the organisation in that senior figures empower others to ‘foster and promote change’.

**Employer Engagement**

The Learning and Skills Network (2006) explored the term ‘employer engagement’ with a view to arriving at a clear definition. Employer engagement had to encompass both the private and public sectors and also include the voluntary sector. It was perceived as operating at a number of levels: at national and regional level through SSCs, local level through employer participation in forums, at institutional level with employers on boards of governors and at faculty level where employers have been involved with curriculum development. The report argued that employer engagement is more than just having links between colleges and employers, that it had to be real partnership and that colleges had to view themselves as providing services to employers. Macleod and Hughes (2005) articulated the views of FE providers who

‘... had a very broad view of employer engagement, interpreting it as being more than selling training, and being concerned with developing relationships and signposting employers to solutions to meet their business needs.’
Macleod and Hughes (2005) also proposed a typology of activities which constitute employer engagement.

Employers as stakeholders in which they provide leadership through their involvement in the design, development, management, delivery and assessment of learning, e.g.,

- Providing work experience places;
- Acting as visiting speakers;
- Advising on the curriculum and its assessment;
- Participating in college governance;

Employers as consumers in which they purchase diagnostic services and skills development from LSC-funded providers, e.g.,

- Purchasing training needs analysis services to identify workforce development needs;
- Using information, advice and guidance services to source training provision;
- Buying bespoke training for updating;
- Using customised day release or regular provision as part of company training;

Employers as strategic partners in which there is sustained interaction between employers and the planners and providers of learning, e.g.,

- Using LSC sector providers as sources of support for business development;
- Collaborating with planners in developing new provision for the benefit of their own company and the wider sector;
- Contributing in cash or in kind to new or updated resources for learning – joint ventures and shared training facilities;
- Sharing or subsidising specialist staff.

**Research Methods**

Initially it had been the intention to use action research with the action being the use of solutions focussed methodology with groups of employers as a means of giving them a better mechanism of expression in the college. However, whilst this may have worked in cases where there was little or no contact between the College and groups
of employers, in reality many employer sectors already had long established relationships with the College. Furthermore, College managers were reluctant to engage in the use of solutions focussed methodology with their employer groups because there was a concern that the articulation of a future perfect in terms of the service the college provides would raise expectations beyond the College’s current capacity to fulfil.

The use of case studies as a research methodology allows a number of developing stories to be recounted and analysed for common themes to build a rich picture of the leadership underlying those stories. Cohen and Manion (1994) discuss the circumstances in which the observer is a participant or non-participant in the case being studied. In this project a range of emerging stories were investigated, some of which did not involve the researcher while in others the researcher was a participant.

In a small college it is difficult to achieve distance between the researcher and the colleagues whose actions are the subject of the research. This is particularly true where the researchers are relatively senior in the organisation and as a result of engaging in the project develop a greater understanding of the subject. Consequently this presents the dilemma of trying to remain independent of change in order to maintain the integrity of the research and becoming the person leading the development of the College’s thinking and hence being the instigator of change. In this case the imperative of an agenda for employer engagement which was developing external to the College meant that postponing change till after the project was not an option.

Initially it was necessary to understand the external context in which the College was operating in relation to the island’s employers. In October 2007 the States of Jersey Statistics Unit published the Jersey Economic Digest 2007 which provided background information about the size of the various sectors of the economy. This was followed by a College seminar given by the States of Jersey Head of Statistics. Shortly afterwards the Jersey Employers Skills Survey 2007 was published providing information on skills shortages, the reasons for those shortages and how employers thought the shortages should be addressed.

Four areas of the College’s activity were selected for detailed examination in relation to their engagement with employers: hairdressing, financial services, construction and engineering, and IT. With the exception of the Business School and the financial services sector, each of these areas held meetings or events attended by employers or their representative associations. These were supplemented by one to one discussions with some of the employers to tease out how much they knew about the College and what services they could use that the College could provide. In all four curriculum areas the relevant college manager was interviewed to find out what processes their teams used for employer engagement. The College’s Work Placement Co-ordinator was also interviewed about his role and its scope.
Research Findings

Case Study 1 – Hairdressing

The College provides training for 41 salons on the island (just over half the total) on a day release basis at Levels 2 and 3 as part of an apprenticeship scheme. In general a salon would employ only one junior undergoing training at any one time. The full-time lecturer in this area also works every other Saturday in a salon to ensure her skills are current and at the industry standard. The other tutors are part-time and all work in salons for part of their week.

The full-time lecturer actively manages the contact with employers which is undertaken on a weekly basis either by phone or when visiting students in salons. In addition employers receive letters detailing what aspects of hairdressing practice the student needs to work on so that they come up to the appropriate standard in time for assessment. The employer endeavours to ensure that the student has the opportunity to practice the necessary skills on clients in their salons by arranging the work accordingly.

Twice per year, salon owners/managers come into the College to receive a report on their employee’s progress. All hairdressing tutors are present for these discussions. When the employer evenings were introduced it was viewed as a significant improvement. One employer would have liked one additional formal point of communication per year and the opportunity to see the training in College taking place. The opportunity was also taken to consult employers on potential curriculum changes and any other issues. For example, it was decided by the College to make the perming unit non-mandatory. The amount of perming that was taking place in salons had declined significantly and it became very difficult to find clients on which to do the necessary assessments. Having discussed the change with the salons and explained the reasoning there was very little opposition to the change. The Hairdressing Curriculum Manager plans to change the entry requirements for the full time hairdressing courses so they fall in line with the entry requirements for the apprenticeship. She will discuss this with the salons as a way of informing and explaining the current thinking to them.

Five salon owners were interviewed all of whom were very positive about their relationship with the College. The regular contact was valued and they pointed out that any problems were invariably dealt with promptly. One employer wanted the College to act as though the employer was the client rather than the student, but they acknowledged that employers also needed to make the effort to talk to the College more.

Another employer was concerned about how to ensure a flow of junior staff to fulfil salons’ needs and thought there was a mismatch with the College academic cycle. It was felt that there needed to be more communication between the College and employers about other courses that the College ran outside of the hairdressing area. To run the salon successfully this employer recognised that it was necessary to have skills other than hairdressing and wanted to know what other aspects of their business could benefit from College courses.
Case Study 2 – Financial Services

The operation of the Jersey Business School, under whose aegis the financial services industry falls, is different from the rest of the College in that all of its activity is focused on employers and their employees whereas other parts of the College have a mixture of full-time students and some employer-facing work. The business school markets its programme of courses direct to students, employers and sector bodies. Relationship building and networking with employers is considered an important aspect of the work along with sitting on the committees of industry bodies as a means of exerting influence and building reputation. Programme managers are responsible for assessing the suitability of courses for the employer or student. Information about contact with employers is systematically recorded and analysed to inform development of courses. Course evaluations are carried out via mid and end of programme questionnaires and by the Business School Director talking with students during coffee breaks.

The financial services industry is the major employer and wealth producer on the island and faces considerable shortage of manpower and in particular of technical and high-level soft skills. While the College has a business school it has delivered generic UK qualifications rather than ones specifically designed to meet the unique needs of the offshore financial services industry.

Discussions with the sector revealed the need for a high-level skills based programme that specifically meets Jersey’s needs. The foundation degree with its requirement for work-based learning appeared to be an ideal tool. The idea of taking a degree “off the shelf” was rejected and instead funding was obtained from the island’s Economic Development and Education departments to develop a curriculum from scratch based upon extensive market research. In concert with the University of Plymouth, a consultant was appointed who worked with the Principal to carry out the market research. Jersey Finance, the industry promotion body, acted as the project steering group and undertook an extensive survey of the skills of their member companies. This research was followed up by visits to companies and discussions with sixth form and FE students who are the potential customers of the degree.

The research showed that while the technical knowledge of trusts, banking and funds administration was important, it was soft skills, particularly concerned with attitude and motivation that employers most valued. As a result, the curriculum focused on personal development. Nevertheless the technical skills provided a challenge as the College had no staff with the levels of technical skill required on the degree. This was solved through the use of work-based learning. The idea being that sector expertise lay in the industry itself. Industry specialists have been involved even though this means a considerable amount of evening study in what is effectively a full-time course. To accommodate the work-based learning, which takes 50% of the time, the course length has been extended to 44 weeks and employers have agreed to pay students for this experience. A number of other innovations have been introduced including overseas work experience – links are being made with Singapore – and regulatory and professional qualifications such as those of the Securities Institute are being embedded in the degree. The university validation panel said they had not
experienced a degree before that had been built entirely from market research without regard to the existing teaching capacity of the institution.

The Principal took this on as a personal project. He is redesigning the College’s business school to deliver it and the programme has become a flagship and model of how the College engages and works with employers.

**Case Study 3 – Construction and Engineering**

Like hairdressing, there was a longstanding relationship between the College and the construction and engineering industries. Island employers sent their employees to College on day release programmes to learn and qualify in the various trades allied to the construction and engineering industries. At a managerial level there were also two part time degree programmes run in conjunction with London South Bank University to enable construction companies to develop their more senior staff. Furthermore, inspectors recently commented that the level of work placement undertaken by full time students in this area was very high by UK standards. There was frequent contact between College staff and employers. Many have known each other for many years, may have worked together in the industry in the past or known them in a social context; a feature of life in a relatively small and contained community.

Despite the frequency of contact, usually by phone, e-mail or letter, there was considerable difficulty in securing attendance at meetings so that groups of employers could discuss common issues and the College gain a coherent impression of how it might better serve the needs of the industry. To circumvent this problem a meeting of representatives of industry bodies and associations was arranged. An initial presentation by the Head of Faculty explained current provision, student achievement rates and the issues facing this area of the College. The meeting was given a number of suggestions about what future involvement with the College could involve as a starting point for discussion. The list was not intended to be prescriptive but indicative of the extent to which the College was prepared to open up to influence from the industry. The group were invited to produce a statement of what would be different after this and subsequent meetings and how they would know they had reached their objective.

They produced a disparate list, those representing trades wanted changes related to Level 1 and 2 courses while those representing professional engineers wanted more degree level provision. This diversity may have been as a result of having such a broad range of interests represented and as a result it was difficult to bring the feedback to a coherent focus that would lead to desired change. After the meeting the feedback received during the meeting was sent to the attendees. There has been a delay in arranging a second meeting as it was thought that it would be better to wait till the College had decided which direction to move in; the concern was that something might be put in place or promised to this industrial sector which later had to be withdrawn because of a decision at College level.
Case Study 4 – Information Technology

The IT team in the College has concentrated on delivering full time vocational BTEC First and National Diploma courses to 16 – 19 students. Although the results obtained by the students have not been as high as similar courses in other parts of the College, the students have always been able to secure subsequent employment and the College has had some very good feedback on its ex-students’ capabilities in the workplace. This has been as a result of a deliberate decision on the part of the IT Curriculum Manager to ensure that students undertake the most vocationally relevant units which, coincidently, are some of the most difficult. There had been little attempt to find work experience placements for students as this was perceived as an additional, non-essential activity that would distract lecturers from their core teaching job.

Alongside the full time courses, a small programme of part time professional short courses was being developed on a commercial basis aimed at those already working in IT. The range of courses partly reflected the expertise available in the IT team and what the Curriculum Manager thought the industry would want. Recruitment of students was by advertising in the College’s Part Time Course Prospectus.

Initially the programme was aimed at the IT industry, i.e., those companies whose main business activity was IT but it became apparent that a much larger number of individuals were employed in IT roles in companies whose main business was not IT, e.g., financial services and the fulfilment industries, but who needed the capability provided by sophisticated IT systems.

Against the background of the Skills Agenda on the island, it became imperative that the IT team were seen to be actively engaging with employers beyond just providing professional short courses on a ‘take it or leave it’ basis. The Curriculum Manager organised a breakfast briefing for companies employing IT specialists plus representatives of the island’s Economic Development Department. At that meeting the range of activities and capabilities of the College’s IT curriculum team were presented with a proposed vision for the future that involved greater contact with industry. Specifically industry was asked to provide work experience placements for full time students and given the opportunity to discuss how the vision of the future that had been articulated might be modified to better meet their needs. The outcome was a rich range of feedback and the initiation of relationships with the number of organisations. A number of those businesses have since been visited and work placements have been established. The breakfast briefing also highlighted a potential service that could be offered to the IT industry. The College is licensed to use a CompTIA programme that provides an analysis of an individual’s or company’s IT skills. In the new skills orientated environment this has the potential to help define real, as opposed to anecdotal, skill deficiencies and hence training needs.

At a similar time the Principal and Head of Faculty attended an IT focussed meeting organised by the Emerging Industries sub-committee of the local Chamber of Commerce. The meeting was attended by representatives from the IT and telecommunications industry, business leaders and island politicians. One of the main
outcomes of the meeting was that there was a need to develop the infrastructure, legislation, regulation and promotion of e-business. This would be supported by education and training provided by the College. In response to this the IT Curriculum Manager has initiated a proposal to develop and run a Foundation Degree in Online Business Technology and Entrepreneurship with a substantial work-based learning component. This proposal has been actively and enthusiastically supported by the Principal who took it to the island’s HE Development Group, the body that reviews HE course proposals against Jersey’s strategic needs. Having successfully argued the case, the Group approved a sum of money for a detailed feasibility study into the content and potential viability of such a course. The Principal has followed this through by commissioning a consultant to undertake the feasibility study in much the same way as happened in the financial services industry.

Analysis

When considering the hairdressing employers, the examples of explanation to the salons of the reasons for the discontinuation of teaching perming units, and the planned discussions about the changes to entry requirements for the full time courses demonstrate how the College has taken the lead in bringing about change. These were decisions that were made by the College’s hairdressing staff. The arrangement of students’ work in the salons so as to give them practice at skills they will need for forthcoming assessments, demonstrates a willingness on the part of salons to follow what the College asks, albeit in this case that there is a measure of self-interest in having their juniors better qualified. Furthermore, the very act of continuing to regularly work in commercial salons confers credibility with the industry on the College’s staff in this area and makes the job of leadership easier. The actions and relationships described in this case study are consistent with the exercise of distributed leadership, i.e., senior College managers are not involved but have delegated the task of leadership for the incremental changes described.

In many ways the construction and engineering industries present a similar situation to the hairdressing salons in that there is a well established relationship with a skill based sector. However, there was recognition that the relationship with the construction and engineering industries had stagnated and that it was time that the relationship was structured in a different way to enable the sector to have a greater voice in what the College delivered in their area. In this instance the Head of Faculty defined a different grouping to represent the sector and ran an event based on the premise that it was a new start and the College was seeking the industry’s proactive involvement in the development of its services. The lack of focus that came from the initial meeting could have been as a result of a number of factors. The industry’s representatives who attended may have been unaccustomed to being canvassed for their input in this way and consequently were underprepared for the meeting. It could be argued that the College could have given a fuller brief to the attendees with the invite which would have given them time to formulate more cogent answers to the questions posed by the College. In this respect it would appear that leadership was exerted in initiating a change but perhaps it fell short in terms of achieving the objective. This indicates the need for leaders to recognise when it is necessary to
plan the detail of the change process so they can increase the chances of success. A planned follow up meeting was delayed because of a perceived need for clear direction from the College which was not forthcoming during the period of the project.

The College’s IT team is a relatively recent curriculum addition when compared to the decades of involvement with the hairdressing, construction and engineering sectors and did not have a history of involvement with the industry. The advent of the Skills Executive in Jersey and its expected agenda as interpreted by the College’s Leadership Team meant that the IT Curriculum Manager was tasked with increasing the volume of contact with the industry. This was launched with the breakfast briefing, a meticulously planned event with clear and limited objectives. Although responding to a College imperative, the mechanism and scope of the response was entirely decided by the Curriculum Manager.

The contrast between the construction and engineering and IT curriculum areas indicates that the use of distributed leadership can stall: there appears to be a point of equilibrium between the delegation of leadership responsibility and the provision of parameters for its operation such that staff act with confidence.

The development of more on-island HE courses is a strategic objective (Commitment 1.4.5 in the Strategic Plan 2006 - 2011) for the States of Jersey. With both the Foundation Degree in Financial Services and the one in Online Business Technology and Entrepreneurship, the Principal took the decision to lead the process from inception. It was the Principal who recognised the importance of consulting the industry to determine the most useful content. This meant that when the qualification was put through the approval procedure set up by the States of Jersey and that of the University of Plymouth it could be demonstrated that the proposal lined up against the detail of the island’s strategic objectives and all possible objections had already been addressed. This was possible because the Principal, through his interaction with key individuals in the civil administration of the island, was able to identify that this was an occasion when it was necessary for him to adopt a ‘hands on’ leading role. This included not only guiding College staff through the process but also leading the Higher Education Development Group, whose approval is required for new HE qualifications in Jersey, by showing how these proposals met their objectives. In this sense strategic leadership in the College has both internal and external components. After the point of approval the Principal’s focus moved away and the detailed arrangements, staffing, resources, etc., of how the courses come to the point of being deliverable was left to Heads of Faculty and Curriculum Managers.

Comparing involvement with both the Hairdressing employers and the Construction and Engineering sectors against Macleod and Hughes’ (2005) typography of employer engagement shows that only a small number of the factors they stipulate are met. The sectors provide work placements, visiting speakers are occasionally used and one member of the College’s Board of Governors is from the construction industry. Regular day release provision is perhaps the most significant point of engagement.
Against Macleod and Hughes’ (2005) typology the landscape for IT and the Jersey Business School is different. With IT there is provision of work placements, professional short courses and a proposal to provide a diagnostic service in relation to skill deficiency and hence determination of training needs. The financial services sector is well represented on the College’s Board of Governors and although there is no obvious representation from the IT industry, financial services organisations are the major employers of IT professionals on the island. Although in large measure the professional courses run for the IT industry are supply side driven, the approach taken in developing both of the new foundation degrees is one of canvassing employers to determine what they would value in terms of curriculum content. It is this factor that enables the College to adopt a leading role in its relationship with the island’s civil administration. By seeking to add to the quantity of HE that is undertaken by the College over time this will exert a ‘gravitational’ pull on subsequent proposals for HE courses such that it will become increasingly difficult for the island’s civil administration to locate HE provision in a separate institution. In Ogawa and Bossert’s (1997) terms, the actions of the Principal in this matter influence the system in which the College operates by strengthening its future position.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Leadership at a strategic level was exercised by the Principal where step changes were needed and where it was perceived that positioning of the College in relation to its operational environment was necessary for it to retain a significant leadership role in future. Once the step change was irreversibly underway the Principal’s leadership focus moved away to be replaced by the distributed leadership exercised by subordinates to develop the change into operational reality. Consequently, although distributed leadership has benefits to an organisation in terms of spreading the leadership burden and motivating those licensed to use it, that is balanced by significant limitations in the extent and speed with which it can bring about change.

As this project was undertaken in the context of an emerging skills agenda for the island it has enabled the development of a more sophisticated notion of the meaning of employer engagement. It became clear that for hairdressing, construction and engineering and IT, employer engagement activities essentially consisted of the College providing employers with services that could already be delivered. This supply side model implies a relatively superficial level of employer engagement that barely impinges on Macleod and Hughes’ (2005) typology. Where employers were providing work placements this was usually at the initial request of the College. Relatively little evidence was found for employers being proactive and approaching the College to engage in the sectors examined, beyond responding to advertisements for courses. In this respect employer engagement was, in the main, a one way process.

The Leitch Report argued for a greater voice for employers in education so that what colleges provide is more closely aligned to the needs of employers. In the example of the financial services sector they were specifically canvassed about their needs and the College responded by developing a foundation degree that addressed those
needs. Contrast this with the hairdressers’ situation where the one change in curriculum offer that was identified was instigated by the College and the industry was informed rather than the employers indicating what they needed. IT and Construction and Engineering are attempting to put in place mechanisms to ensure the employers’ voice is heard. However the concept of employer voice, and indeed responsiveness to employers’ needs, remain underdeveloped in the College.

The introduction of the Training Quality Standard (formerly the New Standard) has moved the concept of employer engagement to one of responsiveness to employers. In the Jersey context the formation of the Skills Executive and its employer led advisory body, Skills Jersey, implies that the College will be expected to respond to the needs identified by these groups. Given that the College is a near monopoly provider of training to industry in the island, the question arises as to whether the sheer bulk of activity at the College will enable it to exert a significant pull on the leadership of the skills agenda. The likelihood of this would be increased by the type of action the College took in relation to the two foundation degrees discussed above. The leadership tensions that form between the College, the Skills Executive, Skills Jersey and individual employers and how those tensions reach a working equilibrium would provide a suitable area for further research.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the openness and co-operation afforded them by their colleagues and the employers who agreed to the researcher’s presence in meetings. Thanks also go to Gary Jones, Deputy Principal, for his timely discussions that helped progress the understanding of the changing environment in which the College operates.
References


Hubert, P. (1999) Leadership and Management: Necessary Skills for Main Professional Grade Lecturers in a Small FE College, MBA, University of Leicester.


Effective Employer Engagement: How the Employer’s Voice Should Best Inform Methods of Engagement and Responsiveness

Liz Kennedy and Anthony Horne, Stocton Riverside College

Executive Summary

As part of the current national focus on investing in skills, employer engagement and responsiveness is becoming increasingly important for FE colleges. To facilitate this, there is a need for strong leadership within FE to drive forward some of the sector-wide step-changes that are required to be truly responsive to employers. To support these developments and the associated underpinning strategies, primary employer engagement and feedback must be a key driver. This project set out to investigate:

(a) overarching issues faced by employers in relation to training,
(b) how these issues could be addressed through training,
(c) how marketing and engagement methods are perceived by employers and
(d) how employers themselves would like to become more involved in the development and delivery of skills solutions.

In order to identify a varied set of data, the research focussed on two sectors. Firstly, health and social care, where College A has a strong track record of employer engagement and responsiveness. This is a sector which has a strong culture of direct employer investment in training through FE colleges. The second sector covered by the research was creative arts, a sector in which College A has a less robust relationship with employers and which, as a sector, does not have a history of high levels of employer investment in FE level training (in the North East of England). A number of issues were identified in relation to the key research aims outlined above, which will inform leadership strategy and operational approaches within College A and which will also have relevance to the wider sector.
Introduction

Given the ever-increasing national government focus on ‘skills’ and the implied benefits to the individual, employer and wider society resulting from investment in training, engaging with and responding to employers is understandably an area of focus for the majority of FE colleges. This research investigated employers’ perceptions of the need for training and what they would expect from it. There are, of course, various options open to colleges as they attempt to ‘market’ or ‘sell’ their training offering to employers. The research also attempted to investigate a number of the approaches taken and identify employer perceptions of the effectiveness of such methods.

The research addressed two closely linked issues:

1. What are the key issues that employers identify in relation to skills and training?
   - Key issues facing the business / sector,
   - Any areas of training / skills need,
   - Employer expectations from training.

2. What perceptions do employers have about different methods of marketing and engagement undertaken by FE colleges?
   - Perceptions of existing marketing approaches,
   - Suggestions on most preferable methods going forward.

In order to identify a varied set of data, the research focussed on two sectors. Firstly, health and social care where College A has a strong track record of employer engagement and responsiveness. Furthermore, this is a sector which itself has a strong culture of direct employer investment in training through FE colleges. The second sector covered by the research was creative arts, a sector in which College A has a less robust relationship with employers and which, as a sector, does not have a history of high levels of employer investment in FE level training (in the North East of England).

Research Framework

Employer engagement and responsiveness is an increasingly important element of FE activity. Following the Leitch Review of Skills (Leitch, 2006) and the subsequent Government Implementation Plan (HM Government, 2007), it is clear that provision to employers and employees must be focused on equipping both individuals and employers with the necessary skills to provide effective and sustainable employment. Within this remit, FE plays a crucial role as a key, credible and visible route for adults and employers to achieve these necessary skills and developments. Therefore, it is vital that FE evolves to be in a position to respond to and interpret the skills needs of employers and delivers provision that suits the existing commitments of industry. Through initiatives such as Train to Gain, providers of training have access to a
distinct, branded service, actively marketed to employers and individuals. It is therefore necessary for FE colleges to incorporate the Train to Gain brand, and to capitalise on any advantage that this brings, through their own marketing and engagement activities.

Indeed, the Learning and Skills Council Grant Letter 2008-09 (DCSF / DIUS, 2007) and the associated LSC Statement of Priorities (LSC, 2007) outline in no uncertain terms that FE must offer provision that is driven by employer demand. This has been followed by a number of key documents concerned with putting the focus on employer-led skills investment into action. The main documents consulted in conjunction with this research activity were: ‘Train to Gain – A Plan for Growth’ (DIUS / LSC, November 2007), ‘Ready to Work, Skilled for Work’ – (DWP / DIUS, January 2008) and ‘World Class Apprenticeships: Unlocking Talent, Building Skills for All – the Government’s strategy for the future of apprenticeships in England’ – (DIUS / DCSF, January 2008). There have also been a number of research reports written on the subject of employer engagement (though not many specifically on the issue of marketing methods) which were also consulted (e.g. Kelly, 2007; and North East Higher Skills Network, 2008).

Given the strategic drivers outlined above, the research was undertaken on the assumption that FE sees employer engagement and responsiveness as vitally important and also that FE colleges see themselves as key stakeholders in addressing the skills agenda.

However it should also be noted that marketing and engagement with employers are only a single element of the role that FE providers play in meeting the needs of employers. There are a whole host of associated issues in relation to training offered by a provider subsequent to engagement and the ongoing provider – employer relationship which underpins this. Each of these would constitute valuable research projects in their own right. To facilitate this, there needs to be a clearer understanding of effective employer engagement and responsiveness practices. This project, therefore, concerns itself only with an investigation into broad employer perceptions on training and also perceptions of marketing and engagement methods (typically) undertaken by FE colleges. This will inform strategic leadership within FE, by supporting and introducing some of the key messages coming through from employers, which will also filter down into operational developments, for example in relation to the new Training Quality Standard.

**Research Methodology**

The project employed structured telephone interviews with two distinct groups of employers within the two sectors targeted (health and social care / creative arts). Firstly, a sample of employers who are currently engaged with College A were contacted. Secondly, a sample of employers who are not currently engaged with the College were targeted. This was a decision taken in order to give a broad picture of how employer engagement is perceived in an existing customer base and a potentially new customer base. The two sectors were identified for the following reasons:
Health and Social Care

College A currently undertake a large proportion of their employer-led training within the care industry and is therefore a key area of focus for the college both now and in the future. As the College have been successful in engaging with employers in this sector, it was envisaged that employer feedback would give a strong indication of successful marketing and engagement methods and perhaps also methods which were less appealing to employers.

Creative Arts

The creative arts industry was selected because the College has a strong portfolio of provision relevant to the sector, but traditionally has limited levels of employer engagement in the sector. There are a number of factors which contribute to this, for example the nature of the sector in the North East of England is of very small sized organisations, that tend to focus on employing individuals with specific, higher level skills than those currently offered by FE provision. That said, the College is committed to identifying and responding to employer skills need in all sectors and therefore feedback from employers in this sector would prove valuable in shaping leadership approaches to responding to ‘new’ sectors.

A total of 83 employers were contacted and interviewed via telephone in late 2007 and early 2008. The number of employers participating, and whether they are currently engaged with College A, or not, is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants in the research and engagement status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Currently engaged</th>
<th>Not currently engaged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health and Social Care</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Arts</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The employers that participated in the research were from a range of organizations in the two sectors of interest. The majority (65%) were SMEs, employing between 10 and 250 people. 28% were micro-businesses, employing between 1 and 9 people. The remaining 7% were large organizations, employing more than 250 people. Respondents were Managing Directors, Directors, Human Resources Managers, and Owners.

A questionnaire was developed for the purpose of the study. During the interviews, respondents were asked a series of questions, some of which involved them agreeing or disagreeing to a number of options, and others for which they were free to answer in any way. Responses to closed questions were analyzed by examining the frequency of responses. Responses to open questions were coded and the types of responses provided are described. The research questionnaire was designed to identify and support:
**Greater Understanding of the Needs of Employers**

Do existing methods of marketing and engagement take into account bespoke employer need? Perceptions of employers are explored in this section, such as what are the main issues facing the sector and in what ways would they like their employees to develop. Recent training undertaken is explored and what employers expect to receive from training is identified.

**Greater Understanding of How to Engage Successfully with Employers**

Do the methods currently employed actually work? Respondents were asked if they knew of College A, what they want from a training provider, their preferences of marketing materials and communication methods and engaging with training providers.

The research team who contacted the employers was not connected to the employer engagement team within College A, nor had they previously had any dealings with the employers they were contacting and were therefore unable to influence the respondents in any way.

**Research Findings**

**Main Issues Faced by Employers Regarding Training**

Respondents were asked what they thought were the current main issues facing their sector (which could be related to training / skills need). Where more than one employer reported the same issue, the number of employers is shown in brackets.

**Health and Social Care Sector**

The issues that were reported are shown below.

- Lack of funded training (9)
- Having to comply with mandatory training (9)
- Difficulty recruiting or retaining staff (8)
- The cost of training (7)
- Cost of cover when staff attend training (5)
- Sourcing suitable training (4)
- Restricted budgets (4)
- Empty beds (2)
- Time constraints (2)
- Keeping up to date with changes in employment law and legislation (2)
Rising costs
Providing cover for long-term absences and maternity leave
Staff lack commitment to training
Staff have to undertake training in their own time

Creative Arts Sector
These businesses identified a more diverse range of issues.

- The market is shrinking (2)
- Recession – there is a cutback in clients’ budgets (2)
- The effects of the war in the Middle East
- The effects of the smoking ban
- Skills shortages in current staff
- Problems recruiting skilled staff
- Lack of training budgets (2)
- Foreign competitors
- Restructuring and change (2)
- Changes in technology
- Having to compete on cost
- Decline in regional work – more work goes to the South of England
- Increased costs

Three of the respondents reported that they are in a very niche market and so are protected from a lot of the difficulties faced by other businesses in the sector.

The research found that employers identify a number of ‘issues’ as important and that they already appreciate that these diverse issues could be addressed through training. This highlights the importance that FE providers should place on engaging with employers to identify their specific business operation / skill need and not to merely assume that their ‘off the shelf’ training solution will be what an employer or individual needs. It is also interesting that that both sectors identify cost/lack of training budgets as an issue, even in the current climate of subsidized training (for example through Train to Gain).
Skills in Demand

Employers were asked whether there were any specific skills or training that they would like to see developed or updated to benefit their employees.

Health and Social Care Sector

Employers in the care sector frequently noted that training courses are mandatory: hence there was a great deal of interest in courses such as NVQ Levels 2, 3 and 4 in Care and Childcare. The full range of courses that respondents would like their employees to undertake is shown in Table 2. Where more than one employer highlighted a particular course as being of interest, the number of employers that stated each course is shown in brackets.

Table 2: The courses / skills that employers in the Health and Social Care sector would like their employees to have

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>NVQ Level</th>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Management Development Programme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dementia</td>
<td></td>
<td>NVQ Health and Social Care, Levels 2 and 3 (3)</td>
<td>Management Development Programme (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medication Handling / Management</td>
<td></td>
<td>NVQ Childcare Levels 2, 3 and 4 (6)</td>
<td>NVQ Management Levels 3 and 4 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autism</td>
<td></td>
<td>NVQ Care Levels 2, 3 and 4 (4)</td>
<td>New Foundation Stage Planning Document (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing behaviour</td>
<td></td>
<td>Foundation Degree NVQ-Level 5</td>
<td>H &amp; C Registered Managers Award</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>NVQ Level 5 Childcare</td>
<td>Food Hygiene (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Service</td>
<td></td>
<td>Level 2 - HSC7375 (Mandatory)</td>
<td>Health &amp; Safety (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Induction Standards</td>
<td></td>
<td>Care for Childminders</td>
<td>First Aid (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infection Control</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mental Health Care</td>
<td>Whistle Blowing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manual Handling (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mental Capacity</td>
<td>P.A.T. Testing Course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1 Award</td>
<td></td>
<td>Care Policies</td>
<td>NEBOSH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with Aggressive Behaviour</td>
<td></td>
<td>Palliative Care</td>
<td>Risk Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertiveness (with difficult patients)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Advanced training for RGN’s and RMN’s</td>
<td>COSHH (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CACHE Diploma Level 2</td>
<td>Employment Legislation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blindness Awareness</td>
<td></td>
<td>NCFE Quality</td>
<td>Child Protection (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths and English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Adult Protection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Creative Arts Sector

Several of the employers in this sector described how they employ a small number of very highly qualified people, or they only use consultants. Hence they would only be interested in continuing professional development in specific areas. Other employers identified a wide range of courses in which they would be interested. These are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: The courses/skills that employers in the Creative Arts sector would like their employees to have

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Electronic Engineering</th>
<th>Health and Safety</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>Performing Manufacturing Operations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td>Customer Care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Management</td>
<td>Foundation and Middle Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Front of House</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sage</td>
<td>Video production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microsoft Programmes</td>
<td>Graphics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production Assembly</td>
<td>Technical Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>Media Studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 44 courses identified by the employers in the care sector as skills gaps for their employees, 35 are already offered by College A. This again highlights the importance of engaging with each individual employer to identify their specific skills need, even in an area where a college has strong existing employer engagement. Likewise, in the creative arts industry, where of the 18 course areas identified as needed by the employers, 12 are currently delivered by College A. FE colleges must increasingly liaise with employers to design bespoke training programmes and to educate employers that underlying issues can be addressed and tackled through training.
The Benefits Employers Expect to See from Training

Employers in the two different sectors were asked about the benefits they expect to see from training. Their responses are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The percentage of employers who expect to see benefits from training

Key findings:

- Increased productivity is more important in the Creative sector than in the Care sector.
- Increased sales are also more important in the Creative sector, but this benefit is perceived to be the least important in all the sectors.
- The care sector was more concerned with ‘employee’ outcomes such as a higher standard of work and increased confidence and commitment.
- Additional benefits volunteered by employers were employees having more interest, more motivation, increased morale, increased knowledge and understanding, and greater empowerment.

Employer engagement leadership must take into account the expected benefits that employers will get from investing in training. These should be discussed and agreed with the employer at the earliest opportunity.
What Employers Expect from a Training Provider

Respondents were asked to identify the most important thing they look for in a training provider. They were able to identify any factor they wished. The percentage giving each response is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: The percentage of employers reporting different factors as being the most important thing they expect from a training provider

The research shows that the most important factor to employers across both sectors is the flexibility of training delivery times. The Employer Engagement Strategy of College A states that the provision provided by the college must be ‘… of a high standard and be both responsive and flexible’. This is mirrored by the findings of the research which state quite emphatically that flexible delivery times are vital to the employer as well delivery staff with previous industry experience and the ever important factor which is the price of the training. Leadership approaches must take all of these findings into consideration when directing employer engagement and marketing.
**Difficulties Employers Face Committing to Training**

Employers were asked about the factors that might make it more likely for them to commit to training. The following barriers were identified, and the number of employers that described each type of barrier is noted in brackets:

- The cost of training (25 employers)
- Finding the right course (18 employers)
- The time required (13 employers)
- Lack of staff interest (4 employers)
- The cost or hassle of providing cover (4 employers)
- Travel problems, or need for in-house delivery (4 employers)
- The perception that all the staff are already competent, or that training is not part of the culture of the organization (3 employers)

As previous sections indicate, leadership must be aware that cost and time are very important factors for employers when looking at training. Interestingly, the employers questioned did not identify flexibility as a barrier even though it was the top requirement they identified as needed from the training provider. This suggested that respondents are reasonably satisfied with current levels of flexibility amongst training providers, however this must still be a focus of approaches to engagement and marketing.

**Existing Marketing Methods**

Respondents were asked how they had seen College A advertised. They were given a list of options, all of which had been used by College A in the last 6 months across all sectors, and were also asked to volunteer any other advertising media. The results for the two sectors, are shown in Figure 3.
Direct mail and adverts in the Evening Gazette local paper were the most common advertising media recalled by respondents.

However, employers in the Creative sector were more likely to have seen adverts on the internet.

Additional media channels recalled by participants were the radio and television.

This highlights the fact that different marketing campaigns will have differing levels of success. This should be taken into account and employers should be consulted so to identify their perceptions.
Suggested Marketing Methods

Respondents were then asked which method of marketing they believe would work best and be most likely to reach them. The two main methods were by email and by direct mail. The percentage that would prefer each method is shown in Figure 4.

![Figure 4: The advertising media that respondents prefer](image)

- Overall, employers show a preference to be contacted by direct mail.
- More employers in the Creative sector would prefer email contact.

These are interesting findings given that FE colleges are consistently searching for new methods of engagement and marketing. It should be noted that direct mail was shown to be the preferred method of contact across two vastly different sectors. Perhaps it is the content of mailings that should be the focus of debate and innovation.

Suggested Methods for Increased Engagement

Finally, employers were also asked about how they would like College A to make contact with them in relation to their (employer) involvement in future College-led activities (for example, designing of new training programmes). Employers were able to identify as many methods as they wished. A list of options was read to them, and they were also able to make any additional suggestions.
Figure 5: The methods by which employers would like College A to make contact with them in the future

- Employers in the creative sector would like to receive contact by email, and by receiving a brochure or flyer.
- Employers in the care sector would prefer to receive a brochure or flyer or a prospectus.
- Additional methods suggested by employers were letters and telephone calls.

The results of the research show how once again the marketing strategies of engaging employers must vary from sector to sector, as different sectors respond to marketing media in different ways and some media are perceived as more effective than others. This must be taken in to consideration by FE leadership when directing new marketing and engagement approaches in an increasingly saturated training market.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Employer engagement is, and will continue to be, very important for FE colleges. This small scale project has highlighted some key issues that must be taken into account by leaders within FE when directing marketing and engagement approaches.

Firstly, employers face a range of issues, both short and long term. An employer’s bottom line is always going to be their business operation, meeting the needs of their customers and remaining financially sound. However, the research undertaken has highlighted that employers already appreciate that some of these issues can be addressed by training. Therefore, FE colleges should strive to liaise with employers to identify their broad priorities and business needs, and discuss with the employer how elements of these needs can be addressed through training. FE colleges should not assume that they are aware of the issues facing employers, however strong (or otherwise) their employer engagement is. Leadership approaches should direct this ethos of early engagement.
Secondly, flexibility and cost are not new concepts to FE providers, and this research highlighted that they remain potential barriers to employers undertaking training. FE colleges must therefore work closely with employers to maximize the benefits available through initiatives such as Train to Gain and should increasingly take into account the need for flexibility of delivery when developing its workforce.

Thirdly, employers will receive and respond to marketing and engagement in a number of ways. FE providers should not have fixed presumptions that certain sectors will respond positively to certain methods of engagement. Whilst maintaining a commitment to new and innovative methods of marketing and engagement, FE leadership should direct marketing and engagement activities to ensure that they are primarily concerned with furnishing employers with relevant information that will best inform their investment in skills and training.

These three key messages will be taken into account by College A, in relation to both leadership and operational activities.

It is a recommendation of this report that other methods of engagement (for example, field-based sales staff) be examined in future research activities, in order to give an even wider picture of the various methods undertaken by FE providers and to highlight employer perceptions of how they would like the FE sector to operate.

Acknowledgements

The report authors would like to formally record their thanks to J2Profits, who carried out the primary research with great efficiency and professionalism.
References


Responding to Employer Needs

David Hindley, Wigan and Leigh College

Executive Summary

This project explores how a large general FE college can best respond to the needs of employers whilst at the same time working to deliver the priorities established by government and articulated through the Learning and Skills Council. A survey of employers' perceptions was undertaken using both open and semi-structured questionnaires plus an option of on-line questionnaire to encourage participation. Employers were invited into college to participate and were also visited and interviewed by telephone. The research suggests that employers have a generalistic view of training needs and what a college can do to support these needs. Whilst the College has made significant impact on the employer responsiveness agenda, the research also highlights certain restraints and tensions which serve to limit the effectiveness of employer responsiveness. Some of these obstacles are classified as perceptions gaps. The report recommends that more work be undertaken to establish a baseline for analysis of customer satisfaction and impact of delivery on employers' businesses.

Introduction

This project sets out to establish how FE institutions can be more responsive to the training needs of employers in a way which ensures that the employer can confidently expect a successful outcome with a positive contribution to the overall performance of the business. It has been clearly stated that employers, both SME and large companies, spend large amounts of money on training needs, but little of this is spent with providers within the FE sector. Therefore it can be seen that colleges are not successfully acquiring a realistic market share of the potential business available.

In 2007 the UK economy was the fifth largest in the world, following 25 years of growth through low inflation and low unemployment levels. However, economic productivity is relatively poor, which is due to our population's poor skills levels, according to Leitch. The economic progress of China and India is so rapid that they are growing at a faster rate than any comparative areas in the developed world. If the UK is to remain competitive we must address the population's skills levels especially with respect to basic skills at levels 2 and 3. To be competitive we must become more productive, which requires a more highly skilled workforce. The Foster Review identified the future role of FE colleges and the emerging opportunity to generate a renewed and powerful brand image, as a provider of skills to deliver the economic mission. As the Foster Review of FE (DfES, 2005), the National Employers Skills Survey (LSC, 2005), the FE White Paper, (DfES, 2006) and the recently completed Leitch Report (HMT, 2006) all suggest, an employer engagement agenda is vital for
providing FE with a clearer mission and focus by addressing the educational needs of local people and businesses whilst also addressing the wider economic and social challenges of up-skilling the UK population to recognised minimum standards.

As funding for employer engagement did not become available until the establishment of Employer Training Pilots and the official launch of Train to Gain, colleges were commonly working to a full-cost model with employers which often meant working exclusively with larger employers, often in the public sector. This may explain why smaller so-called ‘hard to reach’ employers have, until recently, not always been targeted by FE colleges.

As some colleges became more sophisticated and successful in their employer engagement activities, many developed links with public sector organisations and agencies as a means of consolidating workplace training contracts. Through this many colleges have accessed other sources of funding such as the LSC co-financed European Social Fund (ESF). As such, future research should include an investigation of the various funding routes available outside of Train to Gain through which colleges and their employer-partners fund and operate workforce development programmes.

Most colleges generally welcome the arrival of Train to Gain funding in the form of LSC funding contracts. However, many are critical of the complex and unreliable brokerage service which employers have reported to have found confusing, and through which the college in this study have received little direct training work. It was hoped that the re-branding of the Business Link brokerage service would perform as a conduit to direct employers to the college to result in growth on Train to Gain volume. Yet, although efforts have resulted in regular meetings to review progress and performance with brokerage managers, this has not been the case.

This research project aimed to contribute to establishing a framework for the review of levels of customer satisfaction when responding to employers’ needs within the FE sector. The need to establish key performance indicators and associated performance measures was identified as a priority in working towards a level of excellence in employer responsiveness, and in preparing for accreditation for the “New Standard”.

Wigan & Leigh College is a large general FE college, based in Greater Manchester, at the western edge of the region, with around 4,000 full-time learners, 80% of whom are aged 16 to 18 and 6,500 part-time students who are mostly adults. The College has developed work based learning and Train to Gain, formally Employer Training Pilot, to help meet the demands of the Skills Agenda and to improve employer responsiveness. The College have recruited around 500 apprentices, mostly in construction and engineering, 100 entry to employment and 1,600 Train to Gain learners. Learning and Skills Council data indicate that 96%, of the 407 Train to Gain leavers in 2006/07, successfully completed. Wigan offers courses in all of the LSC areas of learning and they are available from entry to degree level in many curriculum areas. The College is a partner in CoVEs in logistics, computer networking technology and construction regeneration.
As a large general FE College having delivered successful employer provision through three CoVE’s and a large volume of Employer Training Pilot/Train to Gain provision, a framework existed through which this research could be initiated to explore the perceptions of demand led employer provision and the current potential within the FE sector. This consideration included how the priorities of first level two (L2E) vocational training, Skills for Life (SfL) qualifications and skills training delivered through Train to Gain (TtG) meet the needs of employers. This project was based on obtaining employers’ responses to three main questions:

- Is demand led provision led by employers’ needs?
- What can the FE sector do to be more responsive to the Employers’ Voice?
- How is performance and satisfaction measured?

The outcomes from this project will help the College, and hopefully other organisations, to understand the needs of employers, the way providers need to respond, how to measure satisfaction and to judge the position in the organisation in readiness for application for accreditation against the New Standards framework and in preparation for the Framework for Excellence. The new standards framework will replace the previous kite mark awarded to Centres of Vocational Excellence, and will be the indicator that providers are employer responsive.

**Research Framework**

The researchers decided to use the existing employer base as a reference for the project. The College has developed a client relationship management system (CRM) which holds the details of employers and the background information on what work has been done with specific employers. This system is managed centrally and has been introduced through a pilot approach using selected areas of the College. The project team used the works of Chapman (2007) and Kelly (2007) as a framework for the academic thinking behind the research. The criteria referenced in the above work acted as a starting point in formulating the approach and interaction with employers later in the project, and also as a baseline for the questionnaire that we decided to use with senior managers and directors within a range of local employers.

At the outset the team identified that an employer responsive institution could have a perceptions gap when viewed from one of two perspectives. Firstly, the view of a college might be that it was responsive to employers’ needs by virtue of the fact that it provided an offer of provision under all the priorities defined by the current “Strategic Priorities” guidance, and sought to deliver employers’ needs identified by those employers who approach the College. Secondly, from the perspective of the employer, it might be seen that the responsive college is one that actively seeks out employers to engage them in discussions about their training needs, encourages them to work in partnership, utilising efficient forms of communication to keep the employer informed of developments.
The main focus of this work was to be delivered through the Employer Responsiveness team, with roles assigned to the range of staff involved in the team. This included scheduling the project timeline, establishing primary aims and objectives, setting the baseline for the range of questions to be addressed to employers, designing both semi-structured and online questionnaire and interview materials, making visits to key employers to undertake one to one interviews to obtain detailed responses, meeting with groups of employers, collecting the responses, and analysing the findings.

At the outset of this work we knew that perceptions gaps existed. It is important to identify where perceptions are as a result of gaps in real processes or systems, and where they are as a result of lack of understanding or indeed misunderstandings. Given the complex nature of the FE landscape in terms of priorities, funding and developments, it was anticipated that some perceptions gaps would be immediately identified.

**Research Methods**

The researchers decided to undertake a qualitative study based on a set of key questions, derived from the team’s understanding of the current position of the College in the employer responsiveness agenda. The group discussed and agreed the nature of the employer sample, and based on typical low response rates to mail-shot requests opted for a qualitative approach to a target group of 35 employers, a restricted number of representative employers. The feeling was that a large sample would bring complications of diversification and would require more complex analysis that would be prohibitive given the short timescale of this project. From this cohort, we received 28 responses allowing us to have the confidence of an 80% return rate to inform this project. It was hoped that outcomes from this project would inform further research for the future with less demanding time constraints.

The research team devised a set of questions to be used in the questionnaire process with employers. The questionnaire material was produced in interview question format, in written response format and in on-line web based format. This was seen as giving the best opportunity for the employer to respond in their preferred way. This process was structured into three components:

- A questionnaire requiring written responses to the set questions.
- A questionnaire using the same questions, however completed by a member of the research team, whilst in the presence of the employer.
- A “tick box” questionnaire where the employer responded with a score against each question.

The project description and a general invitation to employers was communicated in three ways:

- A letter sent to employers with significant training activity registered on the CRM system asking for a questionnaire response.
A phone call to other employers where the team identified a high probability of positive response in arranging a questionnaire interview meeting.

An email “mail shot” to raise awareness of other employers not in the two categories above asking them to consider the on-line questionnaire.

The project team decided to employ as much personal contact with employers as possible. Within the Employer Responsiveness Team various roles have responsibility for employer liaison. The following activities and contact activity was divided amongst the project team. Examples of contact include:

- College managers, including the Principal, meeting a group of representative employers for a lunchtime activity, based in the College training restaurant, where the employers were grouped with College managers and following lunch, small group discussions, based on the key questions took place, with note takers recording each employer’s views and responses against the questions.

- The E- Business Adviser and the Train to Gain funding officer.

- Visiting companies as part of the defined duties of each role, and at the same time conducting questionnaire interview meetings.

- Managers from the employer responsiveness team visiting companies to undertake questionnaire interview meetings. Also the range of people in the project team undertaking telephone interviews.

This method was chosen since through the client relationship management system, and through the liaison skills of the employer responsiveness team, we decided that the above process would give a level of personal commitment from senior managers within the employer organisation, sometimes large organisations. Also it would give the opportunity for other employers to respond independently where time constraints may have precluded an interview meeting taking place.

**Research Findings**

It was evident from the outset of this project that government and LSC directives have created a dynamic and complex landscape in terms of employer responsiveness and the funding associated with this provision. The recent period has seen significant change from the provision and priorities established in line with the lifelong learning agenda, which developed a plethora of learning options for adults. The removal of much of this provision, focusing on new priorities, has introduced radical change into the adult funding equation, and therefore the range of adult learning provision now available under the current funding methodology.

The drive to open the market to employer provision, including encouraging new providers, along with the priority for Train 2 Gain delivery and the routing of funding through this scheme has introduced a new dimension of provision and providers. This requires high levels of communication with employers to establish a clear understanding of the nature of this provision and its eligibility criteria, in order that the employer may engage employees in the process.
This has not been helped by the initial introduction of the fore-runner, Employer Training Pilot (ETP), later to be re-branded as Train to Gain. Many employers have experienced some confusion given the wage subsidy applied under the ETP scheme, which has for most employers become nonexistent with the new criteria of Train to Gain. Indeed having gone from a wage subsidy under the previous scheme, attractive to employers in encouraging participation, to a mandatory employer fee contribution at level 3 under the current scheme within a short period of two years has had a detrimental impact on the way some employers view the development.

Additional changes with Skills for Life priorities have also contributed to a lack of clarity in employers’ understandings of eligibility requirements, both within the Train to Gain scheme, where provision initially was required to be within the context of other learning but now can be discrete, and with the strategic changes to funding and level of priority attached to ESOL provision. As a result, in some areas this has created niche markets and tailored courses for specific industrial sectors, potentially driven more by methodology than demand, where providers seek the provision to meet the contractual needs rather than the demand led skills needs.

The present policy setting encourages colleges to move from having employer engagement as a sideline of their work to it becoming core business. For this to be successful, colleges will need to demonstrate that they satisfy the New Standard in employer engagement and that they provide a responsive and effective service to industry, where impact and customer satisfaction are key performance measures.

**Obstacles and Perceptions Gaps**

As anticipated, the research found perceptions gaps in relation to employers, employees and colleges that could act as obstacles to effective employer engagement.

**The Employer**

Government priorities for funding have been aimed mainly at young people and full time provision, whilst the additional complications of delivery in the workplace are not obviously taken into account in establishing priorities. The issue of first full qualifications does not always meet with the requirements of the training needs of employers, and may conflict with offering responsive and flexible provision. Some of these constraints, and the work towards solutions, are within the aspirations of demand-led funding, but employers consulted were unanimous that they found it difficult to keep up to date with “policy” changes, and that it appeared to them that the LSC expectations, both of colleges and of employers, often exceeded its commitment to resources. They commented that they relied on the College to keep them informed on a “need to know” basis and to trust the direction provided by the college since they had neither the time nor resources to keep abreast of policy developments.
The outcome of employer consultations revealed that employers commonly have perceptions that generate barriers to providing commitment to employees undertaking learning, training or skills development. These include:

- Not identifying a business improvement outcome from the process.
- Unwilling to support the financial cost.
- Generally preferring employees to acquire skills, not knowledge and qualifications.
- Preferring on the job learning and informal training.
- Some unrealistic expectations of returns on the investment through efficiency and productivity improvements.
- Lack of time and resource to commit to the planning and review of a company training plan.
- Insufficient knowledge of the range of available training and the funding models, to enter into proactive discussions with providers.

The Employee

In addition, employee perceptions can create individual barriers. These include:

- Negative experience of learning at school.
- Difficulties in identifying with Skills for Life needs, either seen as a stigma by some, or inability to see the gap by others.
- Unwillingness to make a personal commitment outside of “works time”, and also difficulties in training before or after the working day, especially for shift workers.

The College

Commonly identified issues include:

- Poor communication from the College to the employer.
- Marketing myopia, selling what the College thinks the employer should want, sometimes because the College has that product on the shelf.
- Flexibility in being able to deliver in a way that fits with employers’ needs and timescales.
- Responsiveness, sometimes as simple as not returning the initial phone call enquiry from the employer, but ironically causing the most damage to employers’ perceptions.
Quality of staff, resources and provision.

Ability to respond to the needs by developing suitable provision.

Not having a corporate identity and the ability to manage external clients in a customer first way.

**Other Research Findings**

From the semi-structured questionnaire, over 50% of respondents said that the company skills development and tracking requirements were clearly identified. This ranged from companies who said; "the majority of our staff are graduates. We have two staff appraisals per year and funding is allocated to a training budget to fund necessary activities". Another company pointed out; "We don't have time to undertake staff appraisals, although we do have some training requirements. We are constantly looking for ways to develop our staff and we would appreciate Wigan and Leigh College assisting in the training needs analysis process and on delivering and tracking".

Of the companies surveyed, 90% had some level of training need and half of these identified the training and took steps to source external providers to deliver this training. From the 21 companies surveyed, only two stated that they are regularly made aware of courses offered by the college that help address their needs. Some companies identified that they had received training solutions from other, less local, providers and had not been aware that the same product had been available from Wigan and Leigh College. When asked if current priorities of NVQ Level 2 and Skills for Life provision satisfied their business needs, 57% said that they did not. Responses included; NVQ level 2 is too low level for our needs, and that most employees would have skills in literacy and numeracy above level 2.

Employers were asked to identify whether they saw FE as product driven or client focussed. 33% indicated that it was product driven, and 24% said that it was definitely not client focussed. Two large companies said that the College was not client focussed and sited a lack of effective communication as evidence.

Companies were asked what the FE sector could do to be more responsive to employers. Employers responded with a range of suggestions including:

- Frequent visits to keep them informed.
- Assist in training needs analysis.
- Employer focussed open days/information events.
- Better liaison and communication processes.
When asked how the company would measure the success of any training undertaken, four companies did not have a process to assess impact. The majority of companies looked to improve competency or performance but did not identify ways of measuring improvements. Of the sample, 19% claimed that employees would feedback to the company using an identified feedback mechanism. Most employers said that they would look to see if the required outcomes had been achieved, following any training activity.

Companies were asked to identify what business benefits they would expect from any training. Responses included:

- Improved levels of employee motivation/confidence.
- Higher levels of productivity and improved quality.
- Increased workforce job satisfaction of better client feedback.
- Only one company identified an expected increase in financial "bottom line" performance.

From the "tick box" questionnaire, 69% of employers responded by indicating that they "agreed" that their organisations training needs were clearly identified whilst 8% said they "strongly disagreed".

**Figure 1: My organisation's training & skills needs are clearly defined**

![Pie chart showing survey results for training needs clarity]

Only 31% of companies agreed that work based NVQ’s satisfied the training needs of their business, and 46% of companies understood what is offered by Skills for Life qualifications.

When asked if the brokerage service provided by Business Link helped them to identify training solutions 25% of employers agreed that this was the case, whilst 50% of employers disagreed.
Companies were asked if they had heard of the Train to Gain provision. In response, 77% said that they had heard of the service, 62% said that they understood what Train to Gain funding covers, and 70% agreed that they knew who to contact to find out more about Train to Gain. Equally, 62% responded to say that their business could benefit from Train to Gain provision. No companies disagreed with this statement.

Of the sample, 83% said that, when sourcing training, their main priority was quality. In addition, cost and delivery mode was identified by 8% of companies.
Feedback from employers indicated that, although they are keen to be kept informed of development on funding and provision, they are unanimous that they want an efficient communication process which updates them on a quarterly basis. This creates a tension in less frequent communications needing to be coherent and comprehensive. It must carry all the relevant information without impacting unduly on employers’ time. In addition, only 23% were in favour of paper based materials to convey this communication. A balanced mix of personal approach and electronic media is preferred.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research project sought to assess whether the needs of employers are being met in a responsive way. The research identified common factors in employer perceptions, that if addressed, are likely to result in better employer responsiveness. These factors include:

- A clear communication strategy, giving employers the information they need.
- Flexibility to deliver provision in a way that suits the customer.
- Solutions based products, not constrained by existing products or models, but delivering measurable improvements.
- Business focus, to have a good understanding of the company, industry and sector.
- Professional Partnership working, involving the client in pro-active developments, but not the problems, operational or political difficulties.
- Make quality an expectation, plan, review and feedback outcomes and levels of satisfaction.

The College has a history of successful participation in employer facing initiatives. This project has highlighted some restraints and tensions which serve to limit effectiveness of employer responsiveness. Some of these are classified as perceptions gaps which are perhaps to be classified as weaknesses or areas for improvement. This may be identified as actual business risk and managed as such.

The recommendation to adapt a holistic organisational approach to employer responsiveness and to treat the activity as core business (and not as a sideline), will necessitate effective and efficient systems and, procedures below the strategic framework, which in turn will address the issues identified both as perceptions based and as business risk based.

Given that the demand led system is a reality, the College must consider the implications for employers, and extend its understanding of employers’ needs, which may fall outside the demand led priorities, but by the very nature are led by the demands of the employer.
A key recommendation of this research project is to fully align a college model of organisational strategy with the employer responsiveness agenda. This will require a customer service process to be embedded within the College as a core business function. A customer relationship management (CRM) system should be seen as an essential component in this process. A coherent Employer Engagement Strategy must be established and embraced across the College.

**Acknowledgements**

The research team would like to thank the Centre of Excellence in Leadership for both funding this work, and for the support provided. The employers who gave their time to contribute to the findings, and staff at Wigan and Leigh College who have made a contribution to the project delivery.

**References**


Developing a Strategy for an FE College to Lead in the Development of the Local Workforce Through Work Based Learning

Urmia Joshi and Andry Anastasiou, Hackney Community College

Executive Summary

This project aimed to develop awareness of good practice in delivering Work Based Learning. Through discussions with leaders and managers, employers and students, the project sought to clarify and develop good practice around the roles, responsibilities and the requisite skills of managers in promoting and operating WBL programmes. The findings suggest that WBL at Hackney Community College is enabling learners to develop their skills base. Leaders perceive that they have been using a range of identifiable skills to set up and maintain WBL programmes and build successful partnerships with employers despite the fact that they have received little specialised training to prepare them for leading WBL.

Furthermore, although most employers are enabling young learners to work in a supported way in the workplace, issues emerged around contractual arrangements and equality and diversity practices. These could be resolved through training for employers to prepare them for working with learners from a range of backgrounds, experiences and attitudes. The 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 research concludes that further training for employers would be a valuable way to build on the good practice and enthusiasm for WBL. It is also recommended that the good practices be cascaded down to potential and other WBL leaders and managers as part of the College’s leadership and management programme.
Introduction

The idea that learning can take place in a variety of locations and have successful outcomes is becoming increasingly accepted, and colleges are willing to experiment with this mode of delivery. Gray (2001) views Work Based Learning (WBL) as learning for work, learning at work and learning through work. There are increasing pressures on colleges to deliver more courses with greater employer links and to deliver courses that contribute to break the circle of low skill equilibrium. Colleges and employers need to work together to deliver WBL and to help learners to integrate key skills taught both in the classroom and in the workplace.

This project aimed to develop awareness of good practice in delivering WBL through discussing with leaders and managers, employers and students their perceptions of WBL. Importantly, the project sought to clarify and develop good practice around the roles, responsibilities and the requisite skills of managers in promoting and operating WBL programmes. This report examines good practice in incorporating diversity, reflected in the local population and raises issues in terms of access to WBL and the manner in which it can take account of equality and diversity. Additionally, it identifies how incorporation of Key Skills in Numeracy is benefiting learners, and in what ways communication and ICT skills are being developed or being used by learners. Finally, the project briefly explores how the effectiveness of WBL can be measured.

Research Framework

Research indicates industry prefers to employ people who can combine the technical expertise needed to do the job as well as have experience of other skills needed in the workplace (Harvey and Knight, 1996, Hales and Phillips, 2003). This integration is not a new idea as it has been the norm of craft related apprenticeships for a long time. Early work included that by the Education Department’s Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) initiative, which ran from 1987-1996. However, it would appear that no significant changes have occurred to address this issue. In a poll conducted by the Forum of Small Businesses (Lightfoot, 2005) it was reported that university graduates do not always make best employees as they can lack the social and organizational skills needed in the workplace.

Biggs (2003) outlines the benefits of WBL as this method makes a distinction between declarative and functional knowledge. The former refers to knowledge which the students can write about, but the latter refers to knowledge which students have to perform in their workplace to demonstrate their understanding. In addition, WBL can also encourage critical reflection (Schon, 1983). Boud (in Weil and McGill, 1989: 42) defined being critical as

‘exploring one’s appreciation of the limitation placed on one’s consciousness by historical and social circumstances, and being prepared to change one’s approach as such awareness creates a new framework within which to act.’
WBL has the possibilities for students to combine both these elements and therefore it is important that the assessments are based in a manner which gives the students a fair chance to demonstrate their declarative and functional knowledge. Recent research conducted by the Institute of Personnel Development (2000) focused on the idea that WBL, ‘combines learning and practice in one activity – learning by doing, for many the most effective form of learning’ as this combination leads to success in organizations.

Dewey (1916) stresses the benefits of learning by experience as this process involves the learner in being engaged in learning through experimenting with new ideas and ways of working. The reflection on the activity allows new thoughts and methods of working to emerge. Similarly, Sangster and Marshall (2000:52) remark that in WBL ‘practice and theory merge and support each other...this allows new insights to emerge from the ongoing learning cycle of – experience – reflection – theory ensuring that the development of any new theory will be truly grounded’. WBL is also seen as an effective way to break the circle of low skill equilibrium. Colleges, trade unions and employers need to work together to improve the quality of work-based learning and these partnerships can

\[\text{‘bring together like minded organisations, more resources, encouraging innovation and collaboration to ensure better, more flexible and more varied provision for learners.’ (NIACE, 2005:11)}\]

In addition, the Workplace Learning Task Force recognises that

\[\text{‘the interests of the stakeholders in workplace learning will be best served if the development and delivery of opportunity can be undertaken in genuine partnership between employers, trade unions, government agencies and learning providers to facilitate, take up learning opportunities and help encourage long term planning and the introduction of appropriate learning programmes.’ (NIACE, 2005:12)}\]

Research conducted by Bridge et al. (1998) and Ram (2000) indicate that any form of systematic learning is difficult in Small & Medium Enterprises (SMEs), because of the workload pressures of staff. As Lange et al (2000) comment, the idea of learning is not a problem but the time and monetary constraints render it very difficult. Therefore, a great deal of the learning that does take place is unplanned and unstructured and done in the learners’ own time.

Organizations which support longer tenures of employment and give the ‘workers’ a voice in the organization form key features of ongoing debate on skill formation and work-based learning (Porter, 1992 and Soskice, 1990). Firms are under no obligation to train their employees and adults have practically no statutory entitlements to training. ‘Licence to practice laws are less extensive in the UK than in France and
Germany, and sectoral agreements concerning qualifications and pay for different occupations are both less wide-ranging and less enforced’ (Green, 2000: 46). In France, companies which employ ten or more employees have to spend a basic minimum of 1.5 percent of their wage bill on training and in Belgium and Denmark workers have the right to paid training leave under some circumstances. The responsibility lies with the individual on the type of training to be undertaken rather than on the firm. This system also has its drawbacks as the training is available only to those who are full-time workers. In the UK there is no system in place which brings together partnerships of employers and educators. In addition, the high mobility of the labour market offers employers no incentives to invest in training or their employees.

Firms are now beginning to get subsidies for staff training - Foundation Degrees (FD) being an example - employers whose staff are on the FD in EY (Early Years) programme are given some reimbursement costs; however, this was inadequate as it is not substantial enough to make any significant difference to the employers. Research conducted by NSTF (2000: 35) recognises the importance of line managers supporting this form of learning as there is a ‘connection between high employee involvement and motivated employees’. Wenger (1998) underlines the role of managers in creating an ethos where there is constant sharing and creating of knowledge and managers can bring about this ambience by giving their employees time to participate in activities and training programmes which will benefit the organization. Creating a workforce which is motivated and trained will enable the organization to survive in a competitive environment.

**Research Methods**

**Focus Group Interviews**

We used Focus Group interviews in order to gain an insight into participants’ thoughts, feelings and attitudes about a particular subject (Somekh and Lewin, 2005). Morgan (1998) states that, ‘the hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insight that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group’. Focus group interviews ‘have been designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment’ (Krueger and Casey, 2000).

Kvale (1996) has noted that the interview process enables the participants to give their interpretations and to discuss these issues from their own point of view. ‘The interview is not simply concerned with collecting data about life: it is a part of life itself, its human embeddedness is inescapable’ (ibid: 287). The purpose of the interview was to discuss in depth the research questions. Using this method would allow the participants an opportunity to talk and discuss issues in a comprehensive manner. We felt that the interview process would draw out the personal experiences of the individuals and that the analysis of the answers would reveal the changes that need to be implemented on the course. The interview questions would also allow the participants to go beyond the narrow confines of the answer and link and relate their answers to a host of other issues which the questionnaire did not allow. Looking at this method through an interpretivist paradigm (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999) would
allow the researchers to empower the participants by listening and acknowledging their individual realities and in the process encouraging dialogue.

However, we were aware that interviews sometimes relay a person or a group’s feelings about certain subjects and these views are not always objective observations and can sometimes be different from the reality of the situation. As experienced researchers, we were aware of the role of group dynamics and made sure that no person/s dominated the group. The focus group interviews for the learners were conducted at the individual colleges (after prior permission from the course tutors and programme area leaders). We were able to ‘gather’ the employers and were able to conduct focus group interviews (on separate specified dates) with them.

**Planning for the Interview**

In planning the interview we made sure that we were clear about the objective of the interview and whether we were focussing on facts, opinions or attitudes (Cohen et. al, 2000). We were aware that the interview questions were a mix of open-ended and closed questions. In addition, we were also able to utilize Spradeley’s (1979) categorization of questions. Some of the questions fell into the following categories: descriptive questions, experience questions, background questions and feeling questions. We felt that these categories enabled us to analyse the data at different levels. The sequence of the questions was thought through, as we did not want to start with a question which might create strong feelings or even unease within the group. We made sure that the first few questions elicited data about their course and then tapered into more specific subject matters. Dates and times of interviews were pre-arranged with course tutors and course coordinators. We tried to ensure that the interview was conducted with minimal disruption to teaching. In some instances we interviewed the students after or before the class or in their lunch break.

**Validity and Reliability**

Studies conducted by Cannell and Kahn (1968) demonstrated that validity in interviews poses many problems as it is difficult to be objective and avoid bias as interviewers and interviewees bring their own personal experiences (positive and negative) into the interview situation. In order to minimise bias the interview questions were thought through carefully and a checklist prepared to make sure that all the points were covered. The participants were informed about the schedule and the format of the interview. Interviews generate a host of emotions and we made sure that aspects such as body language, facial expression etc were all of a positive nature and did not make the interviewee feel that our response to his/her answers was significant. One of the aspects we paid attention to was group dynamics (Silverman, 2004). We were aware that there were groups and some groups were more ‘vocal’ than others. We were as careful to make sure that everyone who wanted to say something was able to and to this extent we felt that we had to control the interview session so that we were able to handle the flow of the conversation, moving on to different topics and letting everybody have a chance to speak.
After conducting interviews with a pilot group, we made changes to the wording of some of our questions, where they were found to be ambiguous and confusing. We also changed the order of the questions as we found that asking non-threatening questions in the beginning puts the respondents at ease and enables them to answer other searching questions with ease.

**Interviewing**

Before we began to interview, we explained the procedure and the reasons for the interview to the group again and asked them if they wanted any further clarification. We also briefed them about the recording of the interview. As Kvale (1996) suggests that the important aspect of interviewing is to bear in mind that interviews are essentially a social interpersonal encounter and the interviewer must follow unwritten social rules. These include being polite and attentive to the respondents and conduct the interview in a sympathetic manner. We ensured that the group were comfortable with us and began by asking them questions which they could answer with ease such as, ‘Which module did you enjoy the most?’ and then slowly asked questions relating to issues such as assessments and WBL.

**Data Analysis of Interviews**

The analysis of the data was done through transcribing and repeated listening to the tapes and then analysing the topics into clusters. We were aware that in transcribing data we were moving from one set of rules - the oral and interpersonal to another written language. So, whilst transcribing we made notes about: what was being said, the tone and speed of the voice, pauses, interruptions, mood of the respondents, interaction amongst the participants, any other events which influenced the interview or the topic under discussion.

Initially, the cluster had many topics and through repeated listening and reading the transcriptions the clusters were organized into themes. The themes were then categorized under headings and sub-headings. Themes were put in order of importance through analysing and noting down the frequency of repetition by the respondents in the different institutions. We also analysed the language from a connotative and figurative viewpoint rather than literal translation. This allowed us to gain a fuller understanding of the data. The data were verified by comparing and contrasting the comments made across the College, interviews with leaders, managers, employers and course tutors.

**Perception**

In recent times the value of ‘perception’ as a mode of interpreting has been recognized (Nespor, 1998). Denzin and Lincoln (2003: 282) discuss the concept of ‘voice’ of the participants in research. They comment that there is a move towards the readers gaining access to the ‘voices’ of the participants through the medium of text and through the use of perception to bring about what Denzin and Lincoln (1994: 64) see as a ‘newer, gentler compassionate gaze which looks, and desires, not technical instrumental knowledge, but in-depth existential understanding’ of the subject and the various factors that affect their lives. Holstein and Gubrium (2000: 33)
stress that human beings are constantly involved in the interpretation process ‘meaning – making’ of their lives and events and focus on the importance of documenting this data.

The nature of this research project necessitated the employment of perception as a means of gaining knowledge and analyzing data in informing changes at ground level. Finally, we were aware that human beings are never completely value free and will bring some of their own perceptions to the research. In this particular case, it was necessary because it allowed us to understand that the participants would tell the story in their own way. People view, perceive and understand situations in different ways. Things can only be understood from the standpoint of the individual as people act deliberately and make meanings of their action in arriving at conclusions. In this research there was space for, ‘interweaving of viewpoints, incorporation of multiple perspectives, dialogue, consensus and confluences to occur’ (Denzin and Lincoln 2003: 264).

This aspect enabled us to comprehend the participants’ experiences, to appreciate how they construct their reality and the meaning they subscribe to their reality. One reason for this is that there was an individual construction of their own world which was grounded in experience, knowledge and the constant negotiation with everyday working practices and their own involvement of the experience and the resulting changes. It allowed us also to integrate theory to practice, since it focussed on the phenomenology of everyday experience (Ladkin, 2004) and allowed for testing of claims with everyday practice at ground level (Whitehead, 2000).

Participants had an understanding of the context as they were part of it and would be able to relate how this context and the practices within the context affected them. There was a shared understanding of the context but they experienced it differently. Recording of this perception through the voices of the participants enabled us to value the interpretation of practice according to their viewpoints. The context bound accounts of practice can give an insight into how practice can be changed and planned and this in turn allowed us to have a focus on the details that, ‘make up the basic concerns of life’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 63) using this as a tool which allows other voices to be heard.

We also decided to look at retention and achievement rates for the course using the class register and tutor assignment tracking data as these are a reliable measure of learner success and in the case of marked assignments are also subject to two verification processes that ensure validity.
Learners’ Profile

Seven learners were interviewed in total. The two tables below summarise some of the data gathered about them.

Table 1 - Areas of study and work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total number of learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall total of learners interviewed</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awaiting employment</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying painting</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying business and administration</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed in trades</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed in media, education and recruit</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 – Diversity and equality data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total number of learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall total of learners interviewed</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BME</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabilities declared</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners aged 16-18</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the two learners working in painting and decorating (trades) is from a BME background. Four of the 5 learners in the business and administration area are from BME backgrounds.

All learners are studying for level 2 qualifications. Most of the learners’ previous qualifications are lower than the one they are studying at the moment. A few learners are studying at the same level as their previous qualifications, the only difference being inclusion of the Key Skills of literacy and numeracy. Key Skills at levels 1 or 2 are embedded into the curriculum.
Research Findings

Areas of Responsibility for Leaders

The leaders interviewed are employed in Hackney Community College (HCC) in leadership and management positions varying from coordinators to Programme Managers. These are first line management positions. Amongst other duties, they are also responsible for some line management responsibility for tutors, and some responsibility for teaching learners on WBL courses. An analysis of their discussions about the process of working with WBL suggests that they have also been responsible for the following areas:

Setting up WBL projects from the initial stages including:

- Establishing or building on relationships with employers.
- Overcoming challenges and conflicts with employers.
- Tracking and managing the paper trail for funding and for Individual Learning Plans (ILPs).
- Enrolling learners.
- Planning for learner support in the form of contracts with employers.

Supporting tutors by:

- Motivating tutors to ensure that the tutors are clear about their roles and responsibilities.
- Ensuring tutors understand how to complete paperwork in a detailed manner.

Working with the following individuals on an ongoing basis:

- Employers, including clarifying learner hours and clarifying assessment.
- Students, by delivering teaching and tutorial practice and gathering feedback from learners about their experiences with employers.
- Other College staff, gathering information on completing paperwork.
Leaders' Perceptions of Skills

This section gives an overview of the perceptions of leaders with regard to skills needed and used for WBL.

All the leaders were of the opinion that lack of time hindered effective implementation of WBL. Their perception was that projects took a long time to get off the ground and sometimes the time scale was rushed. This was however not always seen in a negative light. Some leaders stated that learners responded very well to this time pace, although some added that this had not allowed them time to prepare to support learners in the ways they would normally do. The essential skills required for leaders and managers emerged as:

- The ability to overcome obstacles, including use of negotiation skills with those in external organisations, in order to maintain a strong positive working relationship with employers.
- Good communication skills.
- Unpacking jargon.
- Monitoring the paperwork trail.
- Timely completion of detailed paperwork.
- Effective support skills in working with tutors.
- Teamwork: Ability to ask for and receive assistance from other staff.

Leaders also described the necessity and importance of adopting a proactive approach by ‘jumping in’ and ‘just getting on with it’.

Overcoming Obstacles

Leaders perceived that some systems in the College hindered the smooth operation of WBL, as one manager explained:

‘Some things are not yet written into the curriculum, such as ‘other’ costing to the learner and employer.’

Another perceived obstacle was perceptions of syllabus’ requirements:

‘Elements of the framework that employers and students say don’t need to be done.’

One leader described how she took part in ‘repair work’ to ‘re-establish and overcome these challenges’. Staff made reference to the value of negotiation skills here to ensure the employers were still fully willing to carry out all of their responsibilities.
Communication Skills

Good communication skills, specifically the awareness of potential differences between terminology and the ability to unpack jargon are perceived by leaders as essential skills for establishing WBL projects, as stakeholders can have differing ideas on the terminology. One example was how misunderstandings arose as a result of misinterpretation over key language, with employers confusing ‘apprenticeships’ with ‘day release’ and therefore not being clear about the type of learning that their workers were participating in and the kind of support employers were expected to give.

Communication Skills: Support of Teaching Staff

Leaders saw tutors as ‘key’ to all of the WBL projects and regarded support to the tutors as an essential element of the success of WBL, the main area of support was handling and dealing with the paperwork as it was ‘cumbersome’. Additionally, in some areas there were tutors who had no control over the arrangements of the learner but had the responsibility of the paperwork which led to tensions. Effective communication skills were cited as being essential and for leaders in particular, the ability to communicate to tutors the role, expectations and tasks to be carried out when dealing with any aspects of WBL. Leaders described tutors as being willing and ‘on board’ if it is made clear, ‘what is expected and what needs to be done’.

Monitoring of Paperwork with High Level of Attention to Detail

All leaders described the paperwork for WBL as both extensive and demanding stringent standards. The ILPs were creatively described as, ‘like War and Peace’, other paperwork as, ‘beyond what is reasonable’, enrolment as cumbersome and paperwork in general requiring, ‘very strict standards’ of attention to detail. The ability to manage this process, to call for support from other college staff when needed meant that leaders felt they were slowly getting to grips with paperwork and especially with course folders.

Students’ Perceptions of WBL

Benefits of WBL: Being Employed

The inclusive nature of WBL was commented upon by learners. Learners were of the opinion that WBL has afforded them an opportunity (which traditionally would not be open to them) to improve their skills and to find meaningful employment. Learners also commented that WBL allowed them to participate in education and improve their career choices ‘maybe my own business rather than staying on’. This opportunity had become a reality for one of the learners as the employer had invited the learner to apply for a maternity leave post in the same area that would commence at the end of the learner’s course. The learner’s application had been successful. All of the learners who had already commenced employment as part of their WBL course, described how they were experiencing the world of employment for the first time. One learner described that the real benefit of attending WBL was the experience of working itself, as without the avenue of WBL they would not have been doing
anything at all. Learners commented that they enjoyed, ‘having things to do, I got things to do 5 days a week. I enjoy it’. Learners in Painting and Decorating felt that there were additional financial and practical benefits to being employed. These included access to good tools, uniforms and also to a pension scheme.

**Benefits of WBL: Confidence and Communication Skills Development**

Those learners who had started employment commented on an improvement in their confidence about using verbal communication skills, this was seen as a result of increased interaction with the public (described by one learner as ‘new people’) either over the phone or face to face. Several learners had front-line work roles, dealing with members of the public on a daily basis and dealing with more sensitive issues such EMA fraud. The majority of these learners described that the work was enabling them to become more confident when dealing with the public.

Other learners emphasised the benefits of meeting people in a more informal way. For learners in the trades, this social aspect of work was more focused on the working gang to which they belonged. Learners stated that they were placed in gangs of between 4-7 employees, in which they said they were the youngest employees. Interestingly the learners said that this presented no problems as they were ‘accepted’ by the group.

Success was measured through solving problems or through completion of a task. Learners in trades discussed the value of a completed piece of work

> ‘When you complete a block, it looks nice.’
> ‘I’m proud of the work, I like seeing it, it looks better.’

Two learners in administration commented on the confidence building that occurs when in employment

> ‘It is my first experience of real employment.’
> ‘I’ve also gained experience in a business environment.’
> ‘It’s also helped me gain confidence in confronting problems.’
> ‘Having problems and being able to sort them out is a good thing.’

For other learners, development towards problem solving skills was viewed in relation to the relationship they had with their line managers which could vary. One learner who works for a music production company described the process as moving from confusion to clarity when given support,
'The call comes in about bills, they get transferred to me. Sometimes I get confused. I don’t know the answer to some of the questions. Sometimes I ask my manager and call the customer back.’

and

‘I had a supervisor, but not now. I just ask my line manager... she tells me what I am doing well.’

At other times lack of support for some learners became an opportunity to take the initiative and attempt to find answers, whilst for others it was problematic

‘My manager didn’t help me. They send out paper. I have to figure out what to do.’

These comments came from a learner who worked in an SME.

**Benefits of Key Skills: Numeracy and ICT**

The embedding of key skills in numeracy and ICT is proving helpful to the learners as some learners were dealing with EMA and billing for services

‘Most of my shift is on the computer.’

The perception of learners was that that their tutors and employers had offered to help them to integrate the literacy and numeracy aspects of their course into their work and had supported them with their coursework

‘The line manager, who’s not my supervisor, said she would help me.’

Some learners (in the trades) stated that they were not yet making use of new numeracy skills

‘Maybe later, I’m just an apprentice.’

However the activities they are involved in at work indicate that they are making use of some numeracy skills, by gauging how many litres of paint they will need for a specific job.
Many of the learners stated that they were experiencing positive professional relationships with their employers. All of the learners who were working in education and the trades indicated that they were experiencing positive, encouraging relationships with employers. Only one learner, who was working in an SME in media, thought that the employer and colleagues were not very supportive.

‘Sometimes when I have to email I don’t understand, I have to constantly ask and sometimes people don’t like it.’

Learners in the trades stated that they were aware of the targets for their work. However, some learners in business and administration areas expressed that they have been struggling with a lack of clarification over their hours. Some learners were working 28 hours when the course recommendation had been 17 hours. Learners expressed that they were not clear about the required hours of work and that these had been decreased (twice). Learners stated that this impacted negatively on their own plans and made it difficult for them to manage their timetable effectively. Some learners stated that tutors had enabled them to sort these challenges out.

‘The tutor helps me to sort out the hours; my tutor always makes sure I’m alright.’

It was also clear from the employer interviews that at least one employer had not been made clear about the expected work hours either. This employer stated:

‘It was all rushed. I didn’t know about the hours they were supposed to work. I found out later that they were meant to be working less hours. The College told me.’

In contrast, apprentice painters and decorators stated that they had positive relationships with their employers. This was confirmed by the tutor who noted that they have a strong and longstanding relationship with this particular employer. Leaders at the college noted that their history of developing and maintaining relationships with employers in the trades has its roots in the apprenticeship framework. Learners were aware of some of their contract conditions, such as the length of the contract – to 2009 – and understood that after this there is a possibility of being offered a job. However, some learners in administration were unclear about when the contracts would end.
**Employers’ Perceptions of WBL and of Learners**

Employers expressed a high level of enthusiasm for both taking on work based learners and the desire to carry out the job of supporting learners. One of the employers shared her stories of being really excited about a learner who had a, ‘positive attitude’ and had gained a longer term post as a result of the WBL.

> ’He’s got the right attitude… I told him, you will make any employer proud of you. I’d have 10 of him together. I can train (them) well. He has a good attitude to work. He is a good role model.’

One employer who had students from the painting and decorating areas commented that the success of the WBL is mirrored in the positive experience of the learners. The ease of communication (regarding curriculum and curriculum delivery) with staff members enabled learners to match theory to practice.

The majority of the employers interviewed mentioned that they had received preliminary training prior to taking on a WBL learner and this ranged from training with Construction Industry Training Board to on-site assessor training. The College through Employer Forums provided the opportunity for several employers to discuss their experiences of WBL and one of the employers mentioned attending other support meetings. One employer perceived the process of employing learners from business and administration as being rushed and not having sufficient time to prepare or understand the roles and responsibilities.

> ’I was told to do it. I had a couple of days notice.’

This employer, who had two learners, perceived that she did not have the necessary skills to manage them and was of the opinion that they were not ready for employment. She felt that the attitude of learners which appeared to stem from life circumstances that contributed to not being able to settle into WBL.

> ‘One learner, we took on her mother too, she was late, wandering off. Her mum came in and made excuses for her. I thought, ‘You (mum) should try and be supportive’, there was no support from her mum.’

Regarding the second learner, the employer commented on external factors which were having an impact on her professionalism.

> ‘Her work ethics. She was always late she had attitude, she had other things going on, she had a real struggle, no family support, maybe living alone even.’
Interestingly, the employer also commented that the learner was

‘Not suited for frontline reception work. Maybe it wasn’t for her.’

By contrast the learner did not report any problems. The employer explained that she had attempted to treat both these learners and other more motivated learners with the support she felt would enable them to succeed, but the results of this were very different. The employer was unhappy with both her ability to support the learner and the uneven results of that process

‘But (only) one sailed’, and, ‘I coached her to be assertive – to get her to express herself. I asked x (a team member) to coach her but in a way, maybe I let her down. Maybe I’ve not been so good for her.’

There is clearly a negative impact from the way in which WBL was set up in a tight timescale, as it did not allow enough time for some employers to prepare and receive training for managing learners from diverse backgrounds.

Other employers perceived different WBL challenges, more to do with meeting learners’ needs

‘Problems when skills are required and they cannot be given in-house. Then we have to send them to a sub-contractor and move them from site to site.’

As part of this process, ‘picking up and recording the needs of the apprentices and discussing these with their supervisors’ was seen by employers as very important. One employer had experienced ‘resource’ issues

‘Tools required, books. (We) do not supply these for the apprentices.’

All the employers interviewed stated that they had regular contact with the colleges and described this as, ‘good communication’. The employers noted that there was good communication with most of the tutors. However all the employers stated that there was room for improvement

‘Although there is good communication, it could always be improved.’
Conclusions

The focus group interviews proved to be a useful means of measuring the College’s WBL practices/strategy. Longer term analysis allows this type of data to be further viewed along-side retention and achievement data over a 1-2 year period. This would have enabled the research group to add additional evidence to answering the question of how to measure the effectiveness of a strategy supporting WBL.

The research has identified good practice in HCC particularly in their approach to managing WBL both with employers and learners. The findings indicate that WBL provides opportunities for learners to gain experience of a working environment in an area of their interest, to match class based learning to practice and to develop skills including wider skills of Communication, Numeracy and ICT. There is substantial employer and management support for WBL. Employers and managers are working closely to ensure the success of WBL.

The employers who were interviewed were forthright about their experiences including the challenges that they have faced. Employers are of the opinion that WBL benefits the learners and the organizations. Learners are becoming aware of the world of work and employers are gaining an understanding of how to work with learners engaged in WBL. Some of the difficulties that some employers faced were around accessing appropriate training, timely communication with the College and organising contractual hours with the learners.

All the learners interviewed were of the opinion that WBL had provided them with a positive valuable experience. Some of these included building confidence and self esteem via the support of the employers and tutors (some of whom are managers and leaders in the College). One of the learners was unhappy both about the impact of misunderstandings regarding contract hours and about the lack of support received from the employer; this employer was the only SME employer identified (not interviewed). Further research could identify good and poor practice in employers and categorise these according to the type of employer.

It is evident that leaders and managers in education have worked under time pressure to set up WBL with little or no directly related training. Their areas of responsibility focus primarily on setting up partnerships, maintaining partnerships, managing obstacles and tracking and maintaining good paperwork systems. They have used a range of skills successfully in many situations; this work has contributed to the strong employer-college relationship and to successful WBL practices.

Some of the specific skills needed by leaders and managers to facilitate development of WBL in FE have been identified as:

- The ability to overcome conflict, including negotiation skills.
- Good communication skills, specifically the ability to unpack jargon.
- Ability to closely monitor the paperwork trail.
- Completion of detailed paperwork to an extremely high standard.
- Leadership communication skills to ensure that tutors managed by leaders are fully aware of expectations.
- Teamwork, asking and receiving assistance.
- Working well under time pressure.

**Recommendations**

The following section recommends changes that might need to be implemented in order to raise the effectiveness of employer engagement and WBL.

**For Employers:**

- Being given a term’s notice to enable them to plan and prepare for the learners and the changes that need to be implemented in the organization.
- Focused training on WBL. The training could emphasise aspects such as working with a range of learners who encompass a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds and discussing their responsibilities to learners and tasks to be carried out when engaged in WBL.
- Extending employers’ forums across the whole College. This will act as a common point of exchanging views, ideas and recommendations for improving practice.
- Colleges might want to consider accrediting training for employers and their staff which could form part of CPD.

**For Learners:**

Learners could be made more aware of their responsibilities as employees, for example their contractual conditions, work ethos, working in a team etc. This could be part of tutorials or taught lessons.
For Leaders and Managers:

- Could cascade down their experiences and good practice to other colleagues. The information can be disseminated through team meetings, presenting papers etc. The information can be utilized to inform Leadership and Management programmes as part of CPD.

- To carry out a skills audit of learners so that they can be matched to appropriate roles. Leaders could work with employers to identify the essential skills needed for specific roles in the workplace.

Strategic Leadership Level:

- At a strategic level WBL needs several months planning involving College and employers to facilitate successful implementation.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our thanks to Joannie Andrews (who was the project manager), Ian Ashman and Adebisi Mohammed for their support and encouragement.

References


NIACE (2005) *Priorities for Success*

http://www.niace.org.uk/organisation/advocacy/LSC/priorities-for-success.htm

Last accessed 16/12/05.


Further Information and Contact Details

Research and development are central to CEL’s organisational mission and we seek to encourage mutually-beneficial interrelations between theory, development, policy and practice. We recognise that there are many innovative and effective leaders and leadership practices in the Sector that warrant investigation, analysis and wider dissemination of best practice. A particularly distinctive feature of the CEL practitioner programme is that it enables staff working in the sector to participate in the setting of the research agendas, to define highly relevant issues for leadership and undertake to investigate and research these key themes.

We would like to engage with existing networks within the Sector and develop a wider practice-led research community contributing to current debates on leadership and other related issues.

If you would like to receive further information on the Research Programme, please contact:

Professor David Collinson
National Research Director
Centre for Excellence in Leadership
Lancaster University Management School
CEL Research Office, Room B59
Lancaster
LA1 4YX
Tel: 01524 594364
Email: d.collinson@lancaster.ac.uk

Further information is also available at:
http://www.centreforexcellence.org.uk
http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/leadership/cel/
List of CEL Practitioner Research Volumes

Since the practitioner scheme began in October 2004, over 100 projects have been funded, from which the volumes listed below have been published:

- **Volume 1** - Researching Leadership in the Learning and Skills Sector: By the Sector, On the Sector, For the Sector (2005-06)
- **Volume 2** - Developing Middle Leaders (2006-07)
- **Volume 3** - Leading Quality Improvement (2006-07)
- **Volume 4** - Leadership and the Learner Voice (2006-07)
- **Volume 5** - Collaborative Leadership (2006-07)
- **Volume 6** - Researching Disabilities (2007-08)
- **Volume 7** - Leading Employer Engagement (2007-08)
- **Volume 8** - Distributed Leadership (2007-08)
- **Volume 9** - Leadership Development and Succession (2007-08)
- **Volume 11** - Personalising Learner Voice (2007-08)
Research Publication Notices

Research Reports
Many of the documents in this series are prepublication/preprint articles, which may subsequently appear (part or whole) in peer reviewed journals and books. In most cases they are draft documents, the purpose of which is to foster discussion and debate, prior to publication elsewhere, whilst ideas are still fresh. Further information about the research programme and other papers in this series can also be found at the following websites:

http://www.centreforexcellence.org.uk
http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/leadership/cel/

Citation Notice
Citation should conform to normal academic standards. Please use the reference provided or, where a paper has entered into print elsewhere, use normal journal/book citation conventions.

Copyright
The Copyright of all publications on work commissioned by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership is owned by Inspire Learning Ltd, from whom permission should be sought before any materials are reproduced. Short sections of text, not to exceed two paragraphs, may be quoted without explicit permission, provided that full acknowledgement is given.

Centre for Excellence in Leadership
The Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) was launched in October 2003 as a key national agency, but now operates through a charitable trust formed by its operating company on 1 April 2006. CEL's remit is to foster and support leadership reform, transformation, sustainability and quality improvement in the Learning and Skills Sector. CEL's Research Programme is sponsored by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) to whom all the results will be reported.

Disclaimer
These projects have been commissioned by, but do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre for Excellence in Leadership.

Contact Details
Centre for Excellence in Leadership
Lancaster University Management School
CEL Research Office, Room B59
Gillow Avenue, Lancaster LA1 4YX

Professor David Collinson
National Research Director
Tel: 01524 593147
Email: d.collinson@lancaster.ac.uk

© CEL – March 2008
Leading Employer Engagement

Edited by Professor David Collinson

Volume 7

“The Leitch-Foster agenda presents a golden opportunity for colleges to place their work with employers firmly at the centre of their activity and to demonstrate, convincingly and powerfully, their capacity to make a unique contribution to the prosperity and well-being of our nation.”

(Chapman 2006: 33)