

Reaching further

Workforce development through
employer-FE college partnership



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Foreword by Richard Lambert, CBI



In the face of the economic downturn, businesses will be turning a more exacting eye on the productivity and effectiveness of their workforces. And if we are to see the major improvements we need, that means looking at the skills of all our employees and taking steps to boost them – both now and in an upturn. Tougher economic times make skills more important, not less.

In a global economy, business investment and job opportunities are driven by costs and talent. Since British businesses struggle to compete on costs, they must outperform competitors on high-value products and services. But our competitors are constantly raising the bar. And a CBI survey analysed in this report shows that more than half of employers lack confidence in their ability to recruit enough people with the skills they need in the future. With the great majority of the 2020 workforce already having left compulsory education, we've got to raise standards among those already in the workforce.

As this report shows, strong links already exist between many businesses and colleges. The need now is to strengthen those existing ties and to encourage more businesses and more colleges to work in partnership. Although nearly half of training is already delivered by external providers, only half of employers report having links with FE colleges and fewer still use colleges to develop the skills of their employees. This report should encourage more businesses to look in the direction of colleges when thinking about how to train and develop their workforces.

But this report is not only about action by employers – we need to see more colleges too upping their game. There are plenty of examples among the case studies of colleges that are actively engaging with employers, but our member firms don't always find every college equally ready and willing to respond to their needs. The emphasis, quite rightly, is now very much on moving towards a demand-led skills system. For that to work effectively, colleges will need to strengthen their ties with employers to understand better the skills required and to organise their training offer in ways that achieve best fit with employer and employee needs.

There is a persuasive and robust business case for collaboration between employers and colleges. What is also needed are examples of how the two sides can best work together and the type of benefits that can be achieved. This report aims to fill that gap. None of the businesses or colleges in the case studies claim to have all the answers. What they do have is plenty of experience that can provide lessons and inspiration for others.

Richard Lambert
Director-General
CBI

Foreword by Roger McClure, LSIS



The government has made clear its ambitions for raising the level of skills in the UK workforce in order for the economy to prosper and for businesses to compete successfully on the international stage. During a time of economic uncertainty and challenge, enhancing skills will become even more essential. Within this high-profile agenda, the role of the FE system is key. To achieve the scale of the ambition, the capacity of the system to deliver high quality, flexible provision will need to expand.

Success can only come from a partnership between business and the FE sector. This report outlines many examples of effective practice but there is much further to go if we are to meet the goals set by government.

In delivering to businesses, successful colleges will need to incorporate some of the lessons outlined in this report. Successful employer engagement involves recognising employers as customers and establishing processes and a culture that supports them. Colleges need to talk in the language of business, illustrating the bottom-line benefits of skills and how these skills can have a beneficial impact in the market. This will become increasingly important in times of financial constraint. Provision also needs to be flexible to meet employers' business needs within the structure of their own operations.

But it is not a one-way street. Employers need to participate as well. There is a wealth of expertise and experience within colleges that can support businesses and employers need to tap into this resource. They must actively engage with colleges making clear the skill requirements they have and the business impact they want to see. There must be support for employees as the attainment of skills depends both on their willingness and their opportunities to learn. The benefits of training must be seen and supported throughout the organisation.

There is only one way to build on and develop the examples of effective practice in this report – employers and colleges working together.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Roger McClure". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Roger McClure
Chief Executive
Learning and Skills Improvement Service

Executive summary

The UK needs more people at work with higher levels of skills. Faced with growing investment in skills among established competitor nations in the developed world and rising economic powers across Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe, the UK must intensify its drive to become an economy based on high added-value goods and services.

Further education colleges are well-established as a major source of training provision. Many already have strong links with employers. The government is committed to supporting colleges to work more effectively with businesses in the coming years, putting learners and employers in the driving seat to reinforce a demand-led approach.

The purpose of this report is to highlight examples of good practice where colleges and employers have worked together successfully to achieve high quality workforce training, tailored to meet the needs of employers and employees. There are lessons here for FE colleges in how to engage effectively with employers. There are also lessons for employers who are not yet making the most of the resources that colleges can offer to help in achieving the levels of skills their employees need now and for the future.

Structure of the report

Chapter 1 sketches the range of forces behind the drive to enhance skills across the economy. In particular, it highlights the importance of employers and FE colleges working together, since there is a pressing need to add to the skills of many of those already in the workplace.

Chapter 2 uses survey data to explore the extent to which employers in England are already engaging with FE colleges and employer views on a range of other skills supply and demand issues.

Chapter 3 goes on to review the 15 key themes that emerge from the case studies of employer and college partnerships. There are lessons and ideas here for colleges and employers that can contribute to more effective co-operation in the development of skills.

Chapter 4 contains a series of detailed accounts of practice on employer engagement in 13 colleges, illustrated with case studies of employers that have used the colleges' services. These contain a wealth of ideas and illustrations of approaches that all parties can draw on to help achieve more effective partnerships in workforce development.

The lessons of experience

Key conclusions emerge from this research project as central to strengthening employer-college partnership:

The college offering

- Colleges need to be clear about the place of employer engagement in their strategies. If it is to play a major part, that commitment needs to permeate the college's approach and activities
- Successful employer engagement involves recognising the employer as the primary client and establishing processes to support that – this can represent a major cultural adjustment
- Effective marketing, promotion and explanation of college services are essential to extend the client base. This can be done in many ways
- One of the best sources of business is repeat business, so client satisfaction is essential
- Developing a reputation for sectoral expertise can be a major asset
- Dialogue with employers on training issues must be based on skills needs and conducted in business language
- Colleges have an essential role to play in interpreting and analysing employers' needs in ways that allow effective training programmes to be put in place.

College structures and staffing

- Creating a single point of contact for employers is valuable in clarifying college arrangements
- An employer engagement unit can act as training broker offering services of others as well as the college
- It is important that employer engagement is not seen as exclusively the concern of the employer engagement unit but as something for the whole college. Equally, staff in the unit need to have a good understanding of the full range of college services
- Colleges adopt different approaches to incentivising their staff involved in employer engagement – what matters is having a well-considered approach
- Continual change in training provision is an inevitable reality and colleges need to maintain flexibility to adapt

- Having an effective customer relationship management (CRM) system in place is enormously valuable
- Explicit service standards for dealing with employers help shape expectations and achieve consistency
- Colleges possess important USPs in their ability to build long-term relationships with employers and expertise in identifying and drawing down funding. Their expertise in managing the paperwork around training, qualifications and funding is a marketable asset
- Colleges need to have the right staff in place to deal with employer-sponsored programmes and fluctuations in demand. Solutions can include recruiting different types of staff on more flexible contracts and building a pool of freelancers and consultants
- The ability to deliver training at locations and times that best suit the employer is essential
- Colleges need to have effective arrangements in place to manage and communicate with their staff working remotely
- Building alliances with other colleges can enable a college to extend its offering and develop a referral network.
- Employers must identify in broad terms the skills they need and help colleges understand these adequately to develop appropriate programmes
- Employers should not be passive consumers – by engaging with colleges to understand the services available and how they work, employers can get more out of the relationship
- While employers are interested in skills rather than qualifications, it is important they appreciate the value placed on formal qualifications by employees and colleges
- For workplace delivery to be effective, employers must be able to offer adequate training and assessment facilities
- Skills acquisition depends on the readiness of employees to learn – they and their managers must be made aware of the benefits to themselves and the organisation and receive support and encouragement
- While public funding is available for programmes which improve skills widely in demand, employers should be prepared to meet the costs of organisation-specific tailored training
- Defining and agreeing training objectives at the outset helps ensure results are in line with expectations

Managing the client interface

- Public funding can be used creatively by colleges to support many programmes. Where employer funding is involved, value for money and realistic pricing will always be essential
- Defining objectives and positive outcomes in business terms at the outset is important for relations with clients and for providing a basis for measurement
- Review meetings should be held at the end of training interventions to assess outcomes, gather feedback and to consider further potential training needs
- In the course of their work with employers, colleges can pick up new practices that could improve to their own operations. This requires arrangements to be in place to identify practices and alert college leadership to them.
- At the end of a programme, jointly reviewing processes and results with the college helps shape any future programme and identify return on investment
- It is an important part of good corporate citizenship for employers to help colleges to understand changing business needs and to adapt their course offerings accordingly.

Issues for policy makers

- It is important to minimise chopping and changing programme funding in ways that make it hard for programmes to be run on a stable basis
- Publicly funded programmes can sometimes seem more product-led than demand-led
- Training should address real business needs, not be focused primarily on delivery of qualifications.

Action by employers

- Employers should recognise that the FE sector has changed greatly and that many colleges can now help achieve improved business performance through upskilling employees

A focus on England

This report concentrates on employers and FE colleges operating in England, as this is where the LSIS operates. Many of the lessons are applicable to other parts of the UK, though within different policy, funding and regulatory frameworks.

1 Forces for change

“Further education is so fundamental to so many of the things this government wishes to achieve.” The words¹ of DIUS secretary of state John Denham highlight the importance of the FE sector.

The government has repeatedly pointed to FE colleges as having a critical part to play in developing the skills essential to the economy. As a recent consultation paper summarised it: “Our goal is a skills and FE system which targets support for individuals and employers where it is needed most, and allows colleges and providers to deliver the excellent service we must have as we move towards a sustainable vision of a high-skills, high-employment, high-productivity nation.”²

The quality of links with employers is an essential component in boosting the effectiveness of the FE sector. There is already a great deal of positive practice. What matters now is to grow and extend that practice, particularly as it relates to enhancing the skills of those already in the workplace. We also need more employers to think about how colleges could help in shaping the skills their employees will need in the future. This report aims to demonstrate how employers and FE colleges can work together effectively to strengthen the skills base of the working population.

Before we start to look at that practice and the lessons that emerge from it, it is important to briefly review the factors behind the drive to increase levels of skills.

The Leitch review: setting national targets

The key analysis underpinning current policy is provided by the review of skills carried out by Lord Leitch.³ A step change in the UK’s skills performance is seen as an essential response to growing international competitive pressures. The wide-ranging review set a series of ambitious targets for achievement by 2020:

- Some 95% of adults to have the basic skills of functional literacy and numeracy, up from 85% and 79% respectively in 2005
- Over 90% of adults qualified to at least Level 2, up from 69% in 2005. A commitment to achieve the review’s world-class projection of 95% as soon as possible
- Shifting the balance of intermediate skills to Level 3. Improving the esteem, quality and quantity of intermediate skills. An additional 1.9 million adults with Level 3 attainments, including boosting the number of apprentices to 500,000 a year
- Over 40% of adults qualified to Level 4 and above, up from 29% in 2005.

In large part, achievement of these targets depends on colleges and other training providers working closely with employers, since around three quarters of the 2020 workforce have left education and are already in the labour force.

The government has committed itself to achieving the Leitch targets. A series of important programmes are already in place to support FE colleges in making their contribution and for their expanded involvement with employers in particular.⁴ One important development is the new Training Quality Standard (TQS) – an assessment framework designed to recognise the best organisations delivering workforce training and development for employers.⁵ This replaces the earlier CoVE status (Centres of Vocational Excellence) programme (see box on p7).

The changing demographic context

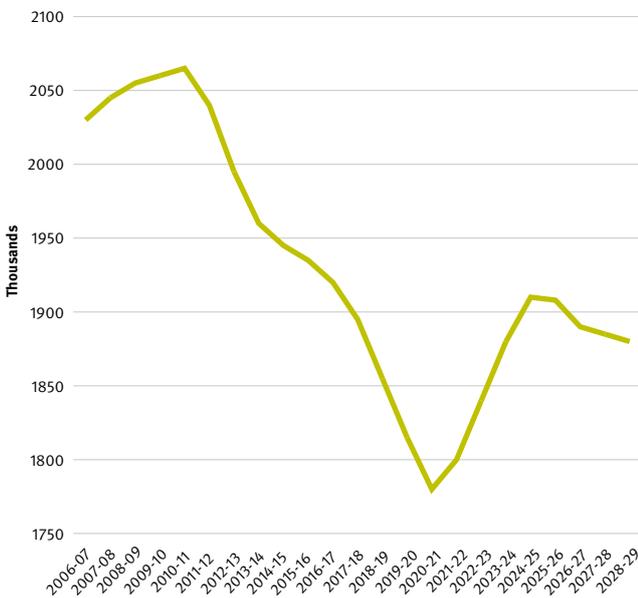
The policy push for FE colleges to become more active in workforce development coincides with a significant demographic shift. In the years ahead, the age group of young people who have traditionally formed the mainstay of the college population will shrink. As **Exhibit 1** shows, in the decade after 2010-11 the number of 18-20 year-olds will decline by more than 12%. If colleges are to maintain and/or grow their volume of teaching activity, they will have to reach out on a larger scale to other age groups and to those already at work.

The value of workforce learning to employers

Emphasis on national policy targets can obscure day-to-day issues within individual organisations. For employers, what counts is the practical reality of filling jobs with capable people rather than achieving targets for qualifications. So is there really a growing appetite among employers for better skilled employees and the qualifications that signal those skills?

According to the results of the CBI/Edexcel survey analysed in chapter 2, more than half of employers are not confident there will be sufficient skilled people available in future to meet their needs. The need for more people with better skills is not only about plugging gaps in day-to-day operations – it also affects the ability of organisations to shape their future successfully. There is now the widespread recognition among management thinkers that “the organisations that will truly excel in the future will be the organisations that discover how to tap people’s commitment and capacity to learn at all levels”.⁷ The average life expectancy of even a multinational corporation is only between 40 and 50 years, roughly half the average human lifespan in advanced economies. A feature of the relatively few long-lived companies is their ability to learn and adapt to ever-changing environments.⁸

Exhibit 1 18-20 year-olds from 2006-07 to 2028-29



Source: Higher Education Policy Institute⁶ using ONS and Government Actuary’s Department (2005 based projections, published in August 2006), adjusted by DfES for academic years

But an organisation can only learn to the extent that its workforce develops, learns and acquires new skills – hence the aspiration of many companies to become ‘learning organisations’.

In brief, for organisations to thrive they need to adapt and innovate. That depends in turn on having people in place with the skills currently required and ready and able to learn new ones in the future. This will become ever more important as global competitive pressures intensify.

A hunger to learn?

How ready are employees to respond to the need to learn and go on learning? In all the discussion about policies and programmes, it can be easy to overlook the perspective of the employee. No matter how comprehensive the institutional framework, in the end it is individual employees who have to apply themselves and acquire skills, potentially recognised in qualifications.

Evidence suggests that most people realise the importance of updating skills and acquiring new ones in order to improve their life chances. For example, in 2006 a quarter of all employees reported

they ‘very much’ wanted training in the future and a further 40% wanted it ‘a fair amount’. Over half (55%) said they wanted to acquire additional skills or qualifications over the next three years.⁹

The same research showed employees appreciate the value of training and development both in terms of enhancing their current job performance and opening up new opportunities. The types of training and development people were most frequently looking for involved acquiring new vocational or professional qualifications. That employees attach value to accredited training is reinforced by the survey results in chapter 2, with over 60% of employers believing employees value qualifications.

The CoVE programme and TQS explained

The Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) programme, started in 2000, was run by the Learning and Skills Council. Following a rigorous application process, training providers were accepted into the CoVE programme in a specialist vocational area and funded to develop their work with employers in the relevant sector. The target was to have 400 CoVEs.

As the employer responsiveness and demand-led agenda developed, it was felt that a new overarching standard was needed to simplify matters for employers by developing a single, national accreditation. Accordingly, the new Training Quality Standard (TQS) was launched.

Providers who wish to maintain formal recognition of their CoVE (or have new centres recognised) now have to seek accreditation under the TQS. An organisation with one or more CoVEs can seek new accreditation under TQS by:

- Applying for assessment for accreditation for part A of TQS (accrediting for employer responsiveness) and
- Applying for assessment for accreditation for part B of the TQS (accrediting for sector expertise) for appropriate sector areas.

There is no new funding for CoVEs along the lines of the former programme, whether for existing CoVE status or for new TQS accreditation.

TQS assesses individual organisations only, not consortia. Many former CoVEs have been amongst the first to gain accreditation under the TQS.

For further information, visit the TQS website: www.trainingqualitystandard.co.uk

2

Employer views on skills and FE

A special analysis has been carried out of returns from the CBI/Edexcel education and skills survey 2008¹⁰ to explore the extent of employer links with FE colleges and other skills supply and demand issues. The results presented here relate solely to England.

With responses from more than 600 employers of all sizes and in all sectors in England, the CBI/Edexcel education and skills survey gives important insights into further education issues from a business perspective. Among the key points are:

- The single most frequently mentioned benefit flowing from the provision of training and development was improved staff morale/lower turnover, followed by improved productivity and better customer service
- Most employers were not confident there would be sufficient skilled people available to meet their future needs
- Employers believed that what mattered most to employees was training to help them carry out their current roles
- Around a fifth of the training provided or supported by employers typically leads to accredited qualifications, rising to 25% among employers who have links with FE colleges
- The biggest barriers to expansion of accredited training concerned cost in terms of lost working time and financial cost
- Shortfalls in literacy, numeracy and IT skills among at least some employees were seen as widespread
- Almost half the employers surveyed had a link with an FE college or colleges
- Among those not using colleges, many employers were unsure about what a college could provide and who to contact.

Exhibit 2: Respondents by sector

Sector	No.	%
Agriculture	3	0.5
Banking, finance and insurance	42	6.6
Construction	62	9.7
Distribution, transport and communication	36	5.7
Energy and water	17	2.7
Hotels, restaurants and tourism	11	1.7
Manufacturing	156	24.5
Professional services (law, consultancy, audit etc)	64	10.0
Provider of public services	15	2.4
Public sector	32	5.0
Retail	41	6.4
Other	158	24.8
Total	637	100.0

Exhibit 3: Respondents by region

Region	No.	%
East Midlands	19	3.0
East of England	31	4.9
London	50	7.9
North East	20	3.2
North West	36	5.7
South East	44	7.0
South West	30	4.8
West Midlands	37	5.9
Yorkshire and Humberside	22	3.5
Two regions	43	6.8
Three or more regions	32	5.1
Whole of the UK	266	42.2
Total	630	100.0

Who took part?

Responses were selected from those participants with operations in England. In all, this produced a total of 637 useable responses. The respondents were drawn from all parts of the economy, including more than 30 public sector organisations (**Exhibit 2**). Manufacturing was the single largest sector, accounting for almost 25% of respondents, followed by professional services and construction, each accounting for around 10% of participant organisations. Respondents were spread across all regions of England but by far the largest single group were those with operations across the UK, accounting for more than 40% of participants (**Exhibit 3**).

The median number of employees among respondents was 345, but the average was much higher at 2,813. These figures reflect the impact of a relatively small number of very large employers, pushing up the average. **Exhibit 4** provides a breakdown of respondents by the number of employees in the UK, ranging from 101 small firms with under 50 employees each to some 70 respondents employing 5,000 or more. The results presented in later exhibits have not been weighted in any way.

Where does training and development fit in strategic priorities?

Respondents were asked to identify the single key strategic priority of their organisations for the next three years. Asking respondents to nominate only their top priority is a stringent test to identify core concerns. The results in **Exhibit 5** demonstrate the importance of commercial results, with over 50% selecting either improved profitability or expansion in markets and products. By contrast, less than 5% of respondents pointed to raising workforce skills as their key strategic priority. A result of this kind is to be expected and emphasises the point that enhancing work-related skills is not an end in itself.

So what do employers look to gain from enhancing employees' skills? The survey asked employers to identify what they saw as the key benefit from investing in employee skills. The most important benefit related to staff themselves, in terms of improved morale and reduced turnover. This was followed by the more obvious business priorities of improved productivity and improved customer service (**Exhibit 6**).

The importance of ongoing investment in skills is demonstrated by **Exhibit 7**. In response to a question about their confidence that sufficient skilled people would be available in future to meet their needs, 55% of employers said they were not confident. This figure rises to more than 60% when the results for manufacturing are looked at separately.

Exhibit 4: Respondents by number of UK employees

Employees	No.	%
Under 50	101	16.2
50 to 199	139	22.3
200 to 499	103	16.6
500 to 4,999	209	33.6
5,000+	70	11.3
Total	622	100

Note: 15 respondents did not reply to this question

Results by quartile and average	Lower quartile	Median	Average	Upper quartile
Number of employees	100	345	2,813	1,425

Exhibit 5: Key strategic priority for the next three years

Strategic priority	No.	%
Expand geographical markets and products	140	26.0
Improve productivity	39	7.2
Improve leadership and management	48	8.9
Improve profitability	191	35.5
Raise workforce skills	26	4.8
Improve customer services	64	11.9
Invest in more research and development	7	1.3
Other	23	4.3
Total	538	100

Note: 99 respondents did not reply to this question

Exhibit 6: Key benefit from investing in employees' skills

Benefit	No.	%
Improved customer satisfaction	132	22.6
Improved market share	21	3.6
Improved staff morale/lower turnover	178	30.5
Improved profitability	67	11.5
Improved productivity	168	28.8
Other	17	2.9
Total	583	100

Note: 54 respondents did not reply to this question

Exhibit 7: Sufficient skilled people to meet future skill needs

Confidence levels	All		Manufacturing	
	No	%	No	%
Confident	231	36.6	46	29.5
Not confident	348	55.1	96	61.5
Don't know	53	8.4	14	9.0
Total	632	100	156	100

Employees' readiness to learn

While employers may need skills and be ready to invest in securing them, how ready are employees to acquire new skills? **Exhibit 8** shows employers' responses to the question: "Do you believe your employees are committed to their own training and self-development?". While all but a handful of employers believed that employees are committed, well over half felt the degree of commitment was not as much as they would like. The results for firms with fewer than 50 employees showed rather higher levels of confidence in commitment.

What is it that employees most value about training and upskilling? The survey asked respondents to identify what they believed to be the single most important item from the employee viewpoint. Top-rated by a big margin was felt to be job-related training to help employees carry out their current role (**Exhibit 9**). The results point to an emphasis on the here and now, with much less weight attached to future employability. In looking at these results, however, it is important to emphasise that respondent employers were asked to identify only a single consideration, painting a simplified picture.

Training delivery and accreditation

External providers play a major role in training and developing staff. Only a handful of respondents reported making no use of providers external to the organisation, as **Exhibit 10** shows. Overall among survey respondents, an average of 44% of training was reported as being delivered by external providers, with a quarter reporting that 70% or more was delivered by external suppliers.

Exhibit 8: Employees committed to training and self development

	All		Under 50 employees	
	No	%	No	%
Yes	219	34.7	46	45.5
Yes, but not as much as we would like	372	59.0	48	47.5
No	40	6.3	7	6.9
Total	631	100	101	100

Note: 6 respondents did not reply to this question

Exhibit 9: What do employees most value?

	No.	%
Job-related training to help them to carry out their current role	361	60.5
Training that leads to vocational/professional qualifications	84	14.1
Support for study outside work	14	2.3
Training that enhances their future employability	132	22.1
Other	6	1.0
Total	597	100

Note: 40 respondents did not reply to this question

Exhibit 10: Proportion of training delivered by external providers

Proportion as %	No.	%
Zero	16	2.6
1 to 19	122	19.7
20 to 39	146	23.5
40 to 59	118	19.0
60 to 79	101	16.3
80 to 99	93	15.0
100	24	3.9
Total	620	100

Note: 17 respondents did not reply to this question

Results by quartile and average	Lower quartile %	Median %	Average %	Upper quartile %
Proportion of training provided by external providers	20.0	42.5	44.1	70.0

The survey went on to look at the amount of training that received formal accreditation. Typically, around a fifth of the training leads to the award of formally accredited qualifications of some kind (**Exhibit 11**). The survey found a very low proportion of organisations where none of the training led to such qualifications. At the other end of the spectrum, about one-in-ten respondents reported that approximately 80% or more of the training they offer leads to qualifications. The activity among these high-end organisations had the effect of pulling up the overall average level of accredited training to 50.6% – far above the median. Among organisations reporting links with one or more FE colleges, the median proportion of training leading to qualifications was 25% – a higher proportion than among respondents as a whole.

Looking separately at the results for firms employing fewer than 50 employees, a higher proportion – over one-in-five – reported that none of the training they offered led to qualifications. In other respects, however, the results for smaller businesses were broadly in line with the general pattern – overall, the median proportion of training and development leading to qualifications was 20%.

The two most frequently given reasons for employers investing in qualifications were to provide assurance of workforce competence (63.8%) and because they believe that employees value qualifications (62.4%). Over a third of respondents also saw the potential to gain qualifications as an aid to recruitment and as demonstrating workforce skills to external customers.

Given the range of benefits attached to accreditation, why is it not more widespread? The survey asked employers about any barriers to offering employees training leading to qualifications. Costs, both in terms of potential loss of working time and financial costs, feature strongly (**Exhibit 12**). Other considerations include perceived lack of relevant qualifications, while a third of respondents believed there was a lack of commitment among employees.

Areas of training activity

The survey showed up continuing concern among employers about levels of basic skills. Over half felt there were problems with IT skills – at least to some extent – among their current workforces (**Exhibit 13**). More than a third reported at least some problems relating to literacy and numeracy. The shortcomings in these skills were reported as having their greatest impact on customer service and overall productivity levels.

When asked whether they provided training to improve employees’ basic skills, more than 90% of respondents said they did so for IT skills. Training of this kind is often used as a means of also boosting employees’ basic literacy and numeracy. A third of respondents said they were specifically providing training in literacy and a slightly smaller proportion (29.5%) in numeracy. The case studies in this report feature examples of this type of activity designed to strengthen basic skills.

Exhibit 11: Proportion of training leading to qualifications

Percentage	All		Manufacturing		Under 50 employees	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Zero	33	5.5	8	5.3	23	23.7
1 to 19	216	35.7	56	36.8	19	19.6
20 to 39	159	26.3	40	26.3	24	24.7
40 to 59	81	13.4	20	13.2	15	15.5
60 to 79	55	9.1	12	7.9	10	10.3
80 to 99	47	7.8	12	7.9	4	4.1
100	14	2.3	4	2.6	2	2.1
Total	605	100	152	100	97	100

Note: 32 respondents did not reply to this question

Results by quartile and average	Lower quartile %	Median %	Average %	Upper quartile %
All	10.0	20.0	50.6	50.0
Manu	10.0	20.0	30.3	50.0
Under 50 employees	2.0	20.0	27.6	50.0

Exhibit 12: Barriers to training leading to qualifications

	All		Under 50 employees	
	No	%	No	%
Too costly	264	49.2	39	48.1
Available qualifications lack relevance to my firm	187	34.9	33	40.7
Too bureaucratic	114	21.3	12	14.8
Cannot find good training provider	55	10.3	7	8.6
Cannot afford to release employees during work hours	331	61.8	48	59.3
Lack of commitment from employees	165	25.9	26	32.1
Other	53	9.9	10	12.3
Total responding	536		81	

Exhibit 13: Literacy, numeracy and IT skills problems in current workforce?

Skill	Yes, to some extent		Yes, to a significant extent		No	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Literacy	225	35.6	42	6.6	363	57.4
Numeracy	200	31.6	38	6.0	381	60.3
IT	298	47.2	64	10.1	268	42.4
Total responding	632					

Moving on to apprenticeships, just over 40% of participants reported currently operating apprenticeship arrangements. The proportion climbed to just over 50% among manufacturing firms (**Exhibit 14**). When asked about factors discouraging them from offering more apprenticeship places, almost half of all respondents said there was no demand within their organisation or this was not an appropriate skill level for their operations. Around one-in-five reported a lack of suitable candidates and a slightly higher proportion said they did not have in-house capacity to provide the training. Results for all respondents and for manufacturing alone are given in **Exhibit 15**.

Employer links with further education

Employers were asked about any links they had with educational establishments, including FE colleges. In all, 299 participants (47%) reported links with FE colleges specifically. The nature of those links is analysed in **Exhibit 16**. Of those organisations reporting links to at least one college, more than 60% reported that they used the college(s) to provide workforce development to at least some extent. This equates to 29.5% of all the 637 organisations taking part in the survey.

Organisations that had not developed links of any kind with FE colleges were asked about the barriers to doing so. Perhaps not surprisingly, the most frequent response was that they had no identified need for college services (**Exhibit 17**) – this leaves open the question of whether this was because of uncertainty about how colleges might be able to help. Turning to other factors, a quarter said they had not developed links because of a lack of information about what colleges offer and a similar proportion pointed to lack of information about who to contact. About one-in-four felt better quality training was available elsewhere.

Exhibit 14: Currently operating apprenticeship schemes?

	All		Manufacturing	
	No	%	No	%
Yes	265	42.7	77	50.7
No, but have in the past	99	15.9	36	23.7
No, but plan to in the next three years	59	9.5	13	8.6
No intention of getting involved	198	31.9	26	17.1
Total responding	621		152	

Exhibit 15: Factors discouraging more apprenticeship places

	All		Manufacturing	
	No	%	No	%
No demand in our firm/ inappropriate skill level	232	46.4	39	25.0
Too costly	76	15.2	21	13.5
Too bureaucratic	74	14.8	26	16.7
Lack of suitable candidates	98	19.6	40	25.6
No in-house capacity to provide necessary training	117	23.4	40	25.6
No opportunity to work with other employees to share responsibility	27	5.4	12	7.7
Qualification does not meet your skills needs	97	19.4	21	13.5
Other	74	14.8	24	15.4
Total responding	500		156	

Exhibit 16: Links with FE colleges

	No.	%
Enhance business reputation	169	56.5
Increase recruitment of future employees	200	66.9
To provide research and development specific to your business	35	11.7
Workforce development	188	62.9
Total responding	299	

Exhibit 17: Barriers to developing links with a college

	No.	%
Lack of information about what colleges offer	50	25.1
Lack of information about who to contact at college	47	23.6
Attempted to engage, but found college unwilling/unhelpful	17	8.5
College training offer inappropriate for the business	37	18.5
Better quality training course elsewhere	49	24.6
No identified need for college services	81	40.7
Total responding	199	

3

Key themes

A prime purpose of this report is to illustrate how colleges are responding to employer needs, so helping other colleges in shaping their own approaches. The case studies in the next chapter should also encourage more employers to consider how FE colleges could help in upskilling their workforces to enhance organisational performance.

This chapter identifies major common themes that emerged, highlighting these in relation to what colleges offer and how they and employers can work together most effectively.

We focus on 15 key issues:

- Commitment to employer engagement throughout a college
- A focus on the employer as primary client
- Getting the message across to employers of what colleges have to offer
- Conducting dialogue about training in business terms
- Having a clear and responsive college point of contact for employers
- The value of effective CRM systems
- The benefits of explicit service standards
- Drawing on the college USPs of continuity and funding expertise
- Having the right staff in place to deliver employer-backed programmes
- Achieving flexibility in delivery
- Building networks with other training providers
- Motivating the learners
- Managing funding effectively
- Agreeing measurable objectives for each programme
- Drawing on the experience of work with employers to enhance college effectiveness.

Commitment to employer engagement

A fundamental requirement for achieving successful engagement with employers is that a college should be committed to this outcome. Superficially, this seems an obvious point. But time and again employer and college interviewees stressed the critical importance of staff at all levels of an FE college being committed to engaging with employers. Many colleges have a strategic view of where employer engagement fits in, recognising the scale of potential business that can result. As one interviewee summed it up:

“Employer engagement is hugely important to us. The number of 16-18 year-olds doesn’t change much from year to year, but there is no limit to the work we can do for employers.”

The commitment needs to permeate a college’s approach and activities. As one college principal warned:

“Don’t do employer engagement unless you are absolutely committed to it. Don’t dabble and fail, as it will hurt employers’ views of the FE sector as a whole. But if you do succeed, the value of work with employers can be high.”

Putting employers centre stage

One of the biggest adjustments required in successfully growing employer-sponsored programmes is that of recognising the employer as the primary client rather than the individual learner. A focus on the employer in terms of administration, reporting on attendance, progress and final outcomes requires changes not only in college processes but also – and perhaps more significantly – in culture and attitude. As one college interviewee put it:

“It is a huge shift for people in education to view the employer as the main client and for us to be concerned with the impact of our work on the business as well as on the individual.”

Achieving change of this kind depends on effectively communicating the importance of employer engagement to secure commitment throughout the college.

Raising awareness among employers

While colleges have successfully forged links with many employers, there are still employers with no ties with an FE college. As the survey results in chapter 2 showed, many of these have not identified how a college might help them or simply lack information about what colleges can offer. In brief, there is a need for effective marketing, promotion and explanation.

“One of the problems is FE colleges using training language when they go into businesses and saying – how many NVQs would you like?”

So how do colleges get the message across to employers about what they can offer? How do they counter the image, as one college described it, of “a dinosaur knocking on the door”? The case studies illustrate a variety of techniques, with no single right answer. Some colleges pursue active campaigns of direct mail and telephone marketing as part of their strategy. Others favour different approaches: Barnfield College for example relies on a combination of a strong local reputation, links with alumni who are now in a position to send staff for training, word of mouth and networking. Certainly the importance of personal contact in establishing initial links emerges in several of the case studies. Telford College encourages potential new clients to visit existing clients to gauge for themselves the impact of the college’s programmes.

Many college interviewees mentioned the value of repeat business – which of course depends on effective training delivery for a client from the outset of the relationship. Derby’s Corporate College, for example, estimates that up to 90% of its business is generated from repeat contracts. Another way of drawing in employers is to run open days and provide taster sessions to give a flavour of the programmes on offer, as at Cleveland College of Art and Design.

In a more unusual approach, Stoke on Trent College runs a recruitment service – this benefits its own students while also bringing the college into contact with large numbers of local employers. The college has also facilitated a series of sectoral networks, providing a cost-effective mechanism for building contact with SMEs which would otherwise be hard to reach, such as black and ethnic minority restaurant employers.

The value of developing expertise in particular sectors is a theme reiterated by other colleges and employers. As one college put it:

“Each sector has its own way of operating so it is important that we have people with an in-depth knowledge of the different parts of industry.”

At West Nottinghamshire College, for example, a positive relationship with a bus company helped in securing a national partnership contract with First UK Bus, which in turn has helped attract other customers. The expertise built up by Barnfield College in the airport services sector, becoming the only college to have held a CoVE in this field, enabled it to develop a growing client base in the sector. As Hadlow College found, with its focus on land-based programmes:

“As soon as learners started to achieve, there is a knock-on effect as we are operating in a specific sector in one geographical area, so word gets around. Since then, it has been like a virtuous circle as our results have helped boost our standing, which in turn encourages more approaches from employers.”

Many of the colleges covered in the case studies held accreditations, with CoVE status in particular seen as being recognised among employers and therefore helping to attract business. In contrast, there seemed uncertainty as to how far employers are aware of the new Training Quality Standard (TQS) or attached value to it as yet.

Employer-led or college-led?

It is now generally accepted that training should be employer-led, but the reality of translating employers’ needs into coherent training programmes is much more complicated. A key starting point is the need for dialogue on these issues to be conducted in terms meaningful to employers:

“One of the problems is FE colleges using training language when they go into businesses and saying – ‘how many NVQs would you like? Or, how many management training packages would you like?’... and businesses think ‘how the hell would I know? I need three people who can do that, I don’t care about the bit of paper.’”

The case studies also make clear the value of conducting a training needs analysis to ensure perceived needs are soundly based – what one college described as a “demand-led, needs-based approach”. A variety of examples are illustrated in the case studies, such as West Nottinghamshire College’s adoption of an online tool to assess basic skills within First UK Bus or Derby College’s approach:

“Typically, with new clients we enter into a ‘progression’ contract. We visit the employer to carry out a skills assessment on the shopfloor, let them know what the results of this are and offer qualifications according to the needs, such as Entry Level 1 or Skills for Life. We then put people through a further assessment day, a ‘skills scan.’”

A theme emerging repeatedly during the case studies is the importance of addressing real skill needs that enhance the performance of organisations, seeing fulfilment of these as the primary objective – not the achievement of qualifications for their own sake:

“Historically, the focus has always been on the learner and the impact of learning and development has been evaluated on an individual basis. The new standard [the Training Quality Standard] will rightly force providers to evaluate the effects on the organisation and consider measures such as staff retention, productivity and so on. Our approach now is a training needs analysis as a first step to evaluate what the employer needs are so that the training and development can contribute to organisational effectiveness.”

As another college put it:

“It is essential that we go out to the employer and help them develop training solutions. But we would never show them the prospectus as a first call. Designing an appropriate intervention means listening to the client and assessing any skills gaps in the context of that company’s business goals, performance management system and other organisational factors. We would also talk to the learners to assess their needs and expectations, and have a dialogue with line managers as they are critical to the implementation of any training programme.”

For dialogue of this kind to be truly effective, there is an onus on employers not merely to identify skill needs in broad terms but also to engage with colleges to understand what they have available. As one employer put it with the wisdom of hindsight:

“We would have made a point of understanding more about what the college does and can do. We spotted the most immediate relationship and started to look at making that work, but we’re learning that there’s lots more people in that organisation who can help us. Our college induction is still going on.”

Another employer highlighted the importance of developing understanding so as to be realistic about what a college can and cannot deliver:

“We had to understand the college’s point of view – it’s really important to realise what can and cannot be achieved. After all, you can’t demand things when you only have one person on a course.”

Structuring for responsiveness

Almost every college covered in the case studies now has an employer engagement unit or department of some type, which acts as the main or exclusive point of contact between businesses and the college. It is generally seen as essential in giving coherence to the college offering, developing relationships with employers and monitoring programme development and delivery.

Interviewees saw the establishment of a single point of contact, with responsibility for managing all aspects of the relationship with an employer, as bringing a range of benefits:

“Having responsibility for managing all employer relationships and delivery of courses and training at one point means we can be much more joined up.”

“We wanted to create a more holistic offering and simplify the customer journey for employers who we view as the primary client. This was a business imperative.”

“Employers are already bothered by the number of training providers without having multiple visits from one college.”

In many cases the employer engagement unit acts in effect as a broker, managing contact between employers and individual college departments and – on occasion – other trainers the college uses. In some instances, this intermediary management role has grown into a major activity. Basingstoke College of Technology, for example, now acts as a broker for the 232 different NVQs and 105 other qualifications delivered to the NHS across Hampshire by four FE colleges. The NHS has just one main contract with the college, replacing 17 previous contracts with a variety of suppliers.

A unified, centralised approach to employer engagement can have added benefits in helping colleges build up a comprehensive awareness of market needs, rather than each department within a college having only a partial picture:

“In most colleges the business development unit is the one that’s got their head out and above the parapet and spends a lot of time looking out.”

There is a potential risk that employer engagement can come to be seen as exclusively the concern of the dedicated unit – interviewees from colleges emphasised the need for knowledge of changing employer needs to be shared and acted on across the college. The business development team at Newbury College, for example, regularly meets with senior departmental staff to exchange information but also provides them with some sales training so they can be involved in dealing with prospective clients.

There is equally a risk that those managing client contact in a business engagement unit may not be aware of everything a college has to offer. Basingstoke College has endeavoured to solve this problem by preparing a briefing document for its business development staff covering key facts about the main learning routes, their applicability to different types of employee, the costs to employers, the benefits and college contact details for each learning route.

The colleges featured in the case studies vary greatly in the numbers of staff dedicated to managing and developing employer engagement, from just two or three staff in some cases to large teams in others. Much depends on college size and strategic choices about the balance of activities. There are also differences of view over how those staff should be remunerated. In some instances colleges felt that an incentive scheme could end up encouraging the wrong behaviours – for example placing all the emphasis on new clients and risking neglect of established customers who are the source of repeat business.

“We needed a way to simplify the process of engaging with businesses so the business team and academic staff could all use it easily. So we needed a CRM to bring all our work together.”

Others strongly favoured cash incentives:

“When an assessor goes in to assess ten people I’d like to be able to say that if you can turn that ten into 15 I can give you a bonus.”

Whatever the approach adopted to engaging with employers, no system can remain unchanged over time. Colleges face the reality of continual change, and it is important to maintain the ability to adapt:

“The LSC could pull the plug on Train to Gain tomorrow, or there could be a new government – things always change. We’ve been through change many times before, but because our research and development function helps us see what’s over the horizon, we have a chance to alter tack, adapt what we’re doing and go for other opportunities. That’s why we have someone who searches constantly for untapped pots of money that we may not have spotted before, so as one dries up, there’s another one available.”

The value of the right systems

Having customer relationship management (CRM) systems in place and using these effectively can be enormously valuable to colleges in building employer engagement. As the case studies show, a CRM system can greatly improve co-ordination. It can capture records of contact with an employer, avoid the risk of repeat or overlapping contacts by college staff, and provide a means of monitoring delivery of programmes through to generating some of the evidence needed to draw down public funding:

“We needed a way to simplify the process of engaging with businesses so the business team and academic staff could all use it easily. So we needed a CRM to bring all our work together.”

Indeed, it seems hard to overstate the importance of such a system – “the single point of truth” as one interviewee at Cornwall College put it. The experience of Newbury College for example illustrates how a CRM system can enable a relatively small team to manage relations and programmes with hundreds of employers. Designing a CRM system can also be an opportunity to draw in teaching staff and help raise awareness of the importance of employer engagement, as at Barnfield College.

Setting standards of service

As well as acting as a contact point, one of the roles of the employer engagement unit at some colleges is to formulate service standards for the college in its dealings with employers. Examples of specific, measurable standards that colleges publicly commit themselves to in terms of their responsiveness are shown in the box on page 22. Commitments about speed of response, provision of information and readiness to engage with clients are seen as playing an important part in fostering business confidence in colleges.

Major USPs for colleges: continuity and funding expertise

One of the main selling points of colleges, identified by employers and colleges alike, is their stability relative to many other training organisations, enabling them to take a longer-term view on building up their relationships with employers:

“Demand-led for us means we’ll deliver what the employer wants once the organisation appreciates the role of training in achieving its objectives. This only comes about by long-term relationships and companies wanting to work with a stable institution – which many local business leaders may have attended in the past – rather than have quick-fix training solutions.”

“Our relationships are built on trust and reputation – what can start as a small programme can often grow and grow with repeat business and new projects.”

“We aim to develop long-term partnerships with employers, rather than carrying out one-off programmes and then moving on to the next company.”

Another area in which colleges can offer important benefits to employers is that of identifying and accessing public funding for training programmes. Telford College, for example, has a member of staff dedicated to searching out untapped sources of funding. Many interviewees pointed to the complexity of funding procedures and the value of the colleges’ expertise in how to draw down funds:

“Part of the skill of team members is their understanding of the funding options available, and ability to advise employers on costing options and benefits.”

“One of our selling points is to say – we have identified as many funding sources as we can ...”

The expertise includes the ability to think laterally, recognising how public funding can potentially be used to deliver the training employers want their employees to receive while also achieving the targets at which the funding is aimed. Some employers have seen this expertise as a valuable opportunity for them to outsource management of the administration and paperwork around training – as illustrated by the example of Marshall Aerospace transferring responsibility for accessing funding for its apprenticeships to West Suffolk College:



“We got to the point where the bureaucracy involved in securing funding and completing the online paperwork became untenable and outweighed the benefits ... outsourcing the management and funding aspects of the programme has lifted a significant part of the administrative burden.”

Staffing for effective delivery

There are two main challenges facing FE colleges that engage in employer programmes on any scale – having the right type of trainer/assessors available to deliver non-standard programmes and being able to cope with the peaks and troughs in demand. Those involved in delivering training and assessment in workplaces have to deal with a variety of issues and pressures not faced by staff teaching timetabled courses in college classrooms. One firm summed up its requirements of trainers in these terms:

“This is a 24/7 business with tight production deadlines. We need a high-quality training provider with commercial awareness and the ability to fit in with our work schedules.”

“We aim to develop long-term partnerships with employers, rather than carrying out one-off programmes and then moving on to the next company.”

Colleges face an additional challenge in securing staff of the right calibre in view of the disparity in rewards between classroom-based FE teachers and those involved in employer delivery:

“People on the traditional side of the equation [FE teachers] are paid between £25,000 and £32,000 a year and people on the other side are being paid £18,000 to £24,000 a year.”

Some colleges in the case studies deal with these issues by recruiting different types of staff, often from industry backgrounds, publicising the opportunity for skilled, experienced people to share their knowledge. Often staff are recruited on different contracts to deliver employer-sponsored programmes – Stoke on Trent College’s trainer assessors for example are employed on contracts that in essence require them to work at any time and any location. The essential requirement for colleges is that trainers should have skills, experience and practical industry knowledge:

“If they have skills and can deal with people, we can upskill them on the education and assessment front.”

Some colleges have also created pools of freelancers and consultants they can draw on to have access to expertise and flexibility in numbers while not building in permanent additions to staff costs. This can include paying trainers per person trained – this helps manage costs and can incentivise trainers to draw in more trainees.

Another method of leveraging expertise for some types of training is to generate additional expertise within the workforces being trained. One college manager explains it to clients in these terms:

“It’s much easier to find people who’ve got perfect occupational competence in the workplace ... Rather than just launching straight on and getting your staff through [an NVQ in] warehouse and distribution, why don’t we identify four or five of your key team and let’s train them up, get them an A-1 [assessment qualification] and then why don’t we work with them to deliver to the rest of your factory?”

Achieving flexibility in delivery

As well as the challenges of being able to field trainers of the right standard in adequate numbers, colleges increasingly aim to deliver training at times and locations that best suit employers. This is an essential requirement if more employers are to be convinced of making or extending their use of colleges. As one college interviewee commented:

“Nearly all our training is delivered on company premises as ... that is the format required by employers – it is all about meeting employers’ precise requirements.”

The importance of colleges adapting to those requirements was a recurring theme in the interviews with employers. As one put it:

“It used to be perceived that colleges couldn’t work the long hours that business needed, but that has been turned on its head by [the college] who are prepared to tailor the design and delivery of programmes to suit our operations. NVQ assessors are even prepared to go on the night shift if necessary.”

Of course, for this type of training and assessment delivery to work effectively it is essential for employers to offer adequate facilities. On occasion, this has not worked out and employers have not been able to provide suitable teaching facilities. Moreover some employers prefer having their employees off-site – as for example in the JCB undergraduate programme with Burton College – using a college’s specialist facilities and perhaps mixing with trainees from other companies.

Flexible delivery can pose practical problems of internal communications and management for colleges, with their staff off the premises for lengthy periods. To help overcome these, West Suffolk College holds an annual conference for its 100 or so assessors, trainers and lecturers engaged on work-based roles.

Building partnerships to enhance delivery

Many of the colleges in the case studies aspire to be a one-stop shop for employers. In reality, however great the scale and range of its expertise, a college operating alone will not be able to fulfil every training request. As the employer charters illustrate, one way of dealing with this situation is for a college to use its awareness of other providers to suggest an alternative on an ad-hoc basis. On occasion there can be benefits in building links with other colleges more systematically. West Cheshire College, for example, is part of a five-member college consortium that bids for contracts, drawing on their respective strengths. One college summed up the case for partnerships in these terms:

“Because of the very local nature of how most FE colleges operate, it is often difficult to work with employers that have multiple sites in different parts of the country. By working with other colleges we can improve and extend our provision and be more responsive to employers ... Ideally this would mean a network of colleges across the area working together to deliver region-wide education to employers – it would provide us with much greater reach.”

Enthusing learners

Skills acquisition ultimately depends on the readiness of people to learn. In discussing means of fostering employer engagement and approaches to programme design and delivery, it can be easy to overlook this. One employer described the majority of its new employees as “hungry to learn”, but there is an essential role for employers to play, in partnership with colleges, in putting across the message of the value and importance of skills for individuals. The message has to reach managers and supervisors as well as potential learners themselves to create a positive climate for training. The case study of First UK Bus Division provides a good illustration, including the involvement of union learning representatives in encouraging staff to take part in programmes. And the responsibility does not end when employees enrol on courses. It is important that positive support should continue during programmes. As one employer commented:

“When we approached the college about what they wanted from us as an employer, they suggested ‘visibility’ to show that we care.”

Funding issues

Cost will always be a factor in an employer’s decision about whether and how to train employees – does it represent a worthwhile investment for the organisation? The costs come not only in terms of fees but also in lost working time, possibly management time assisting with programme development, provision of facilities and so on.

The expertise colleges can offer in sourcing public funding has already been mentioned as a major selling point with employers. While some of the programmes covered in the case studies are run on a fully-funded or part-funded basis, others have involved the costs being met by employers or contributions made in kind – as for example with the Big Studio offering Cleveland College use of its industrial-sized kiln. Colleges involved in such bespoke programmes were very conscious of the need to be competitive, sometimes feeling the pressure of overheads:

“I have serious concerns about how we make this work cost-effectively and a lot of those concerns fall around the high level of overhead FE colleges have.”

Employers in the case studies paying the costs of bespoke college programmes generally felt that these represented good value for money. It has to be recognised, however, that there is no widespread clamour among employers for the chance to pump cash into helping huge numbers of people acquire skills and qualifications that our wider society may need in five or ten years’ time. Some employers felt that despite the emphasis on training being demand-led, on occasion publicly funded programmes appeared to be product-led. But with the right combination of marketing, programme offerings and realistic pricing, many college interviewees saw a bright future:

“The growth and demand is out there in business, and the one thing that further education has always been good at is responding to demands that are placed on it. Colleges that are not currently involved in commercial enterprises should put their toe in the water and grow from there.”

“Nearly all our training is delivered on company premises as that is the format required by employers.”

Assessing impact

A key consideration for employers – and for colleges under the new TQS – is achieving definable positive outcomes in terms of business performance. One college summed up the challenge:

“The difficulty is in isolating the impact of that training from other variables. Although we do our utmost to establish the results of any training, it is a very resource-intensive exercise. But increasingly we will all be judged on the impact of delivery and that is right and proper.”

A number of colleges pointed to the importance of agreeing expected outcomes with employers and the need at the end of programmes to review with them whether the anticipated results had been achieved. A review of this type serves several purposes – providing feedback so programmes can be refined, yielding evidence of benefits for use in promotion to other employers and potentially opening up discussion of further training programmes.

Spin-off benefits

Engaging with employers is an evolutionary process. As one interviewee put it:

“Working with employers helps us to understand business better, which enables us to work more effectively with other employers. It also helps us to change our own internal culture, so that staff understand and focus more on employer needs.”

But there can also be wider benefits:

“The work we’ve done with employers has made this a better college ... If you do a lot of work with many different organisations, it inevitably affects your own business processes. You see things that are absolutely marvellous, and you think: ‘I’m going to have a piece of that and use it as part of our strategic and business-planning cycle.’”

Colleges in the case studies have a variety of arrangements for maintaining links with employers. Often the prime aim is to secure employer input on the relevance and range of college courses. Stoke on Trent College, for example, has acted as facilitator for the 600-member employer network for tourism and leisure in Staffordshire, while West Suffolk College draws on a panel of 20 employers in the region to advise on curriculum needs. Feedback and input from employers are clearly essential if colleges are to adapt their offerings to meet the changing needs of business. As one employer said:

“It’s important to be involved with colleges, not just for our benefit, but also for the students’ sake too.”

Lessons from the case studies

Distilling the main points from this analysis points to the following lessons to strengthen employer-college partnership for the benefit of both parties:

The college offering

- Colleges need to be clear about the place of employer engagement in their overall strategies. If it is to play a major part, that commitment needs to permeate the college’s approach and activities at all levels and be communicated to staff
- Successful employer engagement involves recognising the employer as the primary client and establishing processes to support that – a major cultural adjustment
- Effective marketing, promotion and explanation of college services are essential to extend the client base. This can be done in many different ways – there are no ‘wrong’ approaches
- One of the best sources of business is repeat business, so client satisfaction is essential
- Developing a reputation for sectoral expertise can be a major asset
- Dialogue with employers on training issues must be based on skill needs and conducted in business language, not in the language of education and qualifications
- Colleges have an essential role to play in interpreting and analysing employers’ needs in ways that allow effective training programmes to be put in place.

College structures and staffing

- Creating a single point of contact for employers can be valuable in simplifying and clarifying college arrangements
- An employer engagement unit can act as training broker beyond the college as well as within it
- It is important that employer engagement is not seen as exclusively the business of the employer engagement unit but as something for the whole college. Equally, staff in the unit need a good understanding of the full range of college services
- Colleges adopt different approaches to incentivising staff involved in employer engagement – what matters is having a well-considered approach
- Continual change in training provision is an inevitable reality and colleges need to maintain flexibility to adapt

“Skills acquisition depends on the readiness of employees to learn – they and their managers must be made aware of the benefits to themselves and the organisation and receive support and encouragement.”

- Having an effective customer relationship management (CRM) system in place can be enormously valuable
- Explicit service standards for dealing with employers help shape expectations and achieve consistency
- Colleges possess an important USP in their ability to build long-term relationships with employers and in their expertise in identifying and drawing down funding. Their expertise in managing the paperwork around training is a potentially marketable asset
- Colleges need to have the right staff in place to deal with employer-sponsored programmes and fluctuations in demand. Solutions can include recruiting different types of staff on more flexible contracts and building a pool of freelancers and consultants
- The ability to deliver training at locations and times that best suit the employer is key
- Colleges need to have arrangements in place to handle the issues of communication and management posed by staff working remotely
- Building alliances with other colleges can enable a college to extend its offering and to suggest alternative providers if it is not able to meet an employer’s requirement itself.

Managing the client interface

- Public funding can be used creatively by colleges to support many programmes. Where employer funding is involved, value for money and realistic pricing will always be essential
- Defining positive outcomes in business terms at the outset is important for relations with clients and for providing a basis for measurement
- Review meetings should be held at the end of training interventions to assess outcomes, gather feedback for ongoing programme refinement and to consider further potential training needs
- In the course of their work with employers, colleges can pick up new practices that could improve to their own activities. This requires arrangements to be in place to identify practices and alert college leadership to them.

Action by employers

- Employers should recognise that the FE sector has changed greatly and that many colleges can now help achieve improved business performance through upskilling employees
- Employers must identify in broad terms the skills they need and help colleges understand these adequately to develop appropriate programmes
- Employers should not be passive consumers – by engaging with colleges to understand the services available and how they work, employers can get more out of the relationship
- While employers are interested in skills rather than qualifications, it is important they appreciate the value placed on formal qualifications by employees and colleges
- For workplace delivery to be effective, employers must be able to offer adequate training and assessment facilities
- Skills acquisition depends on the readiness of employees to learn – they and their managers must be made aware of the benefits to themselves and the organisation and receive support and encouragement



- While public funding is available for programmes which improve skills widely in demand, employers should be prepared to meet the costs of organisation-specific tailored training
- Defining and agreeing training objectives at the outset helps ensure results are in line with expectations
- At the end of a programme, jointly reviewing processes and results with the college helps shape any future programme as well as identifying return on investment
- It is an important part of good corporate citizenship for employers to help colleges understand changing business needs and what is expected of students.

Issues for policy makers

- It is important to minimise chopping and changing programme funding in ways that make it hard for programmes to be run on a stable basis
- Publicly funded programmes can sometimes seem more product-led than demand-led
- Training should address real business needs, not be focused primarily on delivery of qualifications.



What's in an employer charter?

Some FE colleges have adopted a customer charter or service standard to set goals in terms of service expectations and delivery for business clients. West Suffolk, Newbury and West Cheshire Colleges are among those with charters or standards of this kind. The extracts below from these three documents give a flavour of the items included.

West Suffolk College promises

- Keep you (the business) informed of our products and services
- Respond to new enquiries within two working days
- Wherever possible suggest an appropriate alternative contact, if we cannot provide the required product or service
- Provide clear information relating to all fees for our services
- Provide essential course information such as dates, times, course content, assessment, success criteria, commitment required and how we will report absence and learner success
- Regular absence reports
- Regular reports on progress
- Monitor and measure the impact of the training on your business
- Where a programme or service is cancelled due to circumstances outside the control of the college an alternative will be offered.

Newbury College commitments

- Respond to telephone calls within five rings
- Feed back to telephone enquiries within one working day
- Acknowledge emailed or written enquiries within three working days
- Arrange for an interview or training needs analysis with a college advisor within ten working days
- If required, a member of the business development team will visit you to discuss and identify your business needs and if requested undertake a training needs analysis to assist in this process
- Once your business need is identified we will endeavour to offer you appropriate solutions to meet that need at a time and a place to suit you and your staff
- Agree how information relating to progress is fed back to the employer
- During a programme the college undertakes to:
 - Provide progress reviews and regular feedback
 - Give learners the opportunity to evaluate the training during its progress and at the end of the programme.

West Cheshire College service standards

- All incoming calls from new employers will be captured at the central employer hotline (target of 90% of calls)
- All calls to the employer hotline will be answered by the employer liaison administrator within ten rings during office hours or within 24 hours of a message being left
- The named contact will respond in the agreed timeframe and will take fuller details regarding the enquiry and will arrange to meet with the employer. If the enquiry is very specialist a curriculum expert will also attend
- If West Cheshire College is unable to meet the enquiry needs, the named contact will offer other high quality training providers who may be able to help
- On initial visit the commercial advisor will undertake a business analysis and then discuss delivery solutions that will meet those needs. If the employer expresses an interest in taking this further the commercial advisor will go on to draw up a training proposal that will be with the employer within seven working days

The training proposal will include:

- Recommended skills development/qualifications
- Timeframes
- On-site/off-site
- Learner screening and indicative levels/support needs
- Employer commitment to learner needs
- A full cost breakdown
- Business/learner benefits

- Commercial advisors will arrange a follow-up courtesy call within six months of the completion of training.

West Cheshire College also has success targets against each of the statements of standards and publishes the means by which these will be monitored by the college.

These include:

- Employer feedback
- CRM system
- Mystery shopper
- Learner feedback.

4

Case studies of employer-college engagement

Many employers already work closely with FE colleges to develop their workforces, as the survey results in chapter 2 show. This section illustrates how a range of colleges approach engaging with employers, including examples of colleges and employers working together successfully to achieve high quality workforce training.

The case studies contain a wealth of ideas and tested approaches that can help colleges and employers.

Participants were selected to provide a spread of colleges of different sizes in different regions of England. The participant employers range from SMEs to multinationals across the economy, from manufacturing to transport and from mining to tourism. The case studies also illustrate different types of programmes – unaccredited ones as well as those leading to qualifications.

The case studies simply provide examples of good or effective practice – there is plenty of equally good practice to be found among other FE colleges not featured in this report.



Building a strong local reputation has been a prime factor in **Barnfield College** developing its work with local employers, including London Luton Airport. It is now shaping the infrastructure to continue that development.



The college has built a strong reputation for itself in airport services – it is the only college to hold a CoVE in this field. In this case study we look at the college's approach to employer engagement and then focus on the training facility and programmes it has developed at London Luton Airport.

A single point of contact for business

Barnfield to Business – B 2 B – is the name of the college's business unit. One of its key functions has been to establish itself as the single business-facing point of contact for employers. Headed until recently by Teresa Frith, former director of business development, the unit is a small team of just three at present, but its activities already contribute significantly in financial terms to the college. And it aims to account for 50% of college income within the next five to ten years. B 2 B operates as a managing agency rather than as a training provider in its own right.

Much of the college's success with businesses has come from the strength of its local reputation – it has not engaged in direct marketing campaigns. An increasing number of ex-students have now reached positions where they are looking for training for their own staff. Links of this type are boosted further by networking by college staff and word of mouth, generating both new and repeat business. As part of managing its reputation for quality, the college intends to continue using its CoVE status as part of the branding because of concerns that the Training Quality Standard will not be widely understood in the near future.

The college works with companies of all sizes, delivering services to major employers like London Luton Airport and General Motors as well as to SMEs. The approach of the college is always directed toward establishing long-term relationships that will encourage companies to use Barnfield for their new and repeat training needs.

Systems to support employer engagement

One of the main activities of the B 2 B unit has been the development of a CRM system. Rather than buy an off-the-shelf system, Teresa Frith assembled a cross-departmental team within the college to generate a brief for the CRM system, based on the functions which college staff wanted from it. Not only did this enable the construction of a system specific to the varied needs of the college, but it was also a useful way of engaging academic staff in the processes and purposes of B 2 B. This was an important step in the transition from having business engagement handled by individual tutors, with their own contacts, to a more centralised system.

One of the main purposes of the CRM system is to achieve better co-ordination, avoiding repeated visits from different departments to the same employer. It also enables the B 2 B team to make sure enquiries are followed up (eg a phonecall should be replied to within 24 hours) and that the services provided to each user can be tracked. Teresa Frith points out that this helps ensure customers receive a good service and potential business is not lost. Tracking the progress of those being trained also helps in gathering the evidence needed by the college to draw down public funding.



Matching staffing to varying demand

Coping with the ups and downs in demand from employers for the college's services inevitably poses difficulties. Part of the college's solution is to operate a pay scheme for its assessors based on a per-head fee rather than a guaranteed salary. This system helps protect the college's bottom line as the wage bill for any course is based on the total number of learners. It also incentivises assessors to draw in more learners. To provide assessors with flexibility as well as to cope with fluctuations in demand, the college offers a variety of work patterns.

One of the challenges facing the college is to recruit assessors, who are expected to work flexibly and autonomously in varied locations – despite a pay gap of several thousand pounds in comparison with FE teachers delivering timetabled classes in college. To date the college has been very successful at attracting assessors to work on a freelance basis – it recently received over 200 applications in response to advertisements whose core theme was 'share your experience'.

Another strategy now bearing fruit has been to train key members of staff within client companies to become assessors. One clear advantage is that these people already have industry skills, experience and credibility in their businesses. In addition, the college has found this a useful means of ensuring people at all levels in client firms are involved in the training process.

Value of funding expertise

Having not lost a single business customer in the last two years, Teresa Frith attributes at least part of that success to Barnfield's expertise in identifying funding which can be drawn down by the college to help meet customer needs. Although almost 30% of the courses run by the college are bespoke, the B 2 B team tries to build flexibility into all its offerings to attract funding wherever possible. In one case this involved running an NVQ course for a customer –

for which government funding could be obtained for the majority of the learners – and including as an accredited module an area of training which would otherwise have cost the client £500 per person. The learners consequently gained a wider range of accredited skills covering the original need of the employer and at a lower cost than a fully tailored programme. At the same time, the college is conscious of the need to avoid delivering funded programmes to businesses purely because the funding is available. Teresa Frith explained the process: "You start off going in [to a business] on the back of Train to Gain or something and when you start getting into the dialogue and listen, you find that the funded packages are probably not the most appropriate match to their needs."

Ongoing contact

B 2 B recognises that assessing the impact of training and establishing its workplace relevance are important to ensure repeat custom. As part of meeting these aims, B 2 B often arranges mentoring support as a follow-up to training programmes. This creates an opportunity for learners to meet with assessors about four weeks after the completion of their course to reflect on how they have put their newly acquired skills into practice. It is also an opportunity to discuss potential future training needs in the organisation.

One lesson learnt is the value of having promotional material available tailored to specific sectors – employers find this much easier to relate to and can more readily see how the college might help them. As a result, the college now tries to provide material which, while covering all their services in general, has a specific focus on courses and programmes relevant to the sector.

One of the key lessons identified by Teresa Frith is the importance of communicating in terms that make sense to business rather than getting caught up in 'education speak': "One of the problems is that FE colleges use training language when they go into businesses and say: 'How many NVQs would you like? How many management training packages would you like?'... and businesses think: 'How the hell would I know? I need people to be able to do a job, the qualification doesn't really matter.'"

Key features of Barnfield College

The college is primarily an FE college, but it also delivers some HE courses and Level 4 management programmes. Graded as an 'outstanding' college and accredited as an Investors in People Champion, it is one of only two colleges to hold six CoVEs. It has also been awarded beacon status.

With over 12,000 students across five campuses in Luton and Bedfordshire, it is one of the largest colleges in its region. The college has embarked on a major £160m capital investment programme which will involve building a mall-style training facility. Within this, there will be retail units, salons and workshops where learners will be able to gain accredited skills in 'real' working environments.

Building a skills partnership at London Luton Airport

London Luton Airport is an international airport 30 miles north of London. It is the fifth busiest airport in the UK, with over ten million passengers in 2008 – three times the number of passengers in 1997. It is a major UK hub for EasyJet, Monarch, Ryanair and Thomsonfly. Most of its routes are within Europe and North Africa. With a turnover in excess of £100m, the airport's operating company, London Luton Airport Operations Limited (LLAOL), is highly successful. Around half of the airport's 550 staff work in security.

This case study looks at the airport's partnership with Barnfield College, which has established a training facility at the airport running a range of training and development programmes. One of its six CoVEs is for 'airport operations', the first of its kind in the UK.

Start of the partnership

In 2004, the college approached London Luton Airport and offered to carry out a training needs analysis of its employees. At first the airport assumed all its employees were at roughly the same level of attainment. Helen Mayhew, a director of Barnfield College, believes the airport's directors also assumed colleges were like schools, operating rigid timetables around a three-term academic year. The college persuaded the employer that it had "a lot more to offer than just a course" – it could bring in industry specialists from its staff pool to offer a range of programmes designed to improve skills at all levels of the business.

The airport saw a partnership with a local college as being a potentially important part of its training plans. It also felt that the link would be consistent with its community engagement strategy. Moreover, the airport recognised that employees can feel 'energised' by training. For this service-oriented business, this could bring bottom-line benefits. The college emphasised that it aimed to "embed the airport brand in the training" – something particularly appealing to the employer.

The first course Barnfield ran for the airport was in customer service – a course to be undertaken by all staff. As it was a nationally accredited qualification, the airport's managing director Glyn Jones believes it offered a carrot to employees to participate. The first cohort of 150 front-line employees was sizeable, but the airport wanted every employee to attain the qualification. The one-day course is due to be repeated soon as it is three years since the programme first ran. The college went on to provide general security awareness training for non-security personnel as well as more specific training as needs arose, such as courses in written communication. Every programme is underpinned by literacy and numeracy training tailored to employees' needs.

Setting up a co-branded facility

Glyn Jones says the airport was impressed by Barnfield's holistic approach to training, so it decided to adopt the college as its primary training provider. It is "ultra simple to have one supplier", and the airport has "enough critical mass to get a decent deal". Flexible delivery is important – Barnfield "delivers courses in a way that fits [the airport]" as well as sourcing government funding, taking a bureaucratic burden away from the company and reducing costs.

The airport established a co-branded facility – known as the CoVE (adopting the branding of the CoVE programme) – and provided a building for the college to use in running training on-site. The facility includes college-networked computers and smartboards, as well as classrooms and office space for college staff and is leased at minimal cost to the CoVE. Students also have access to a learning resource centre where IT-based materials and journals are available.

Identifying training needs

According to Helen Mayhew, the airport industry is "aware that it must invest far more in staff development" if it is to attract the best people to its jobs. Sometimes the industry is not aware of its own training needs. Realising this, Barnfield assessed all the airport's employees free of charge to measure levels of functional literacy and numeracy. An internal review of personal development plans across the company in 2007 identified further development needs, and helped the college shape course modules.

Analysing training needs continues on a rolling basis, allowing the college to be responsive to the needs of new airport staff too. The business development department of the college recently met 38 newly recruited employees to complete individual learning plans identifying their training priorities – the college then fed the information back to the business and together they selected appropriate modules and courses. Glyn Jones is keen to tap potential that has not yet been brought out, and to do so requires flexibility and a thorough understanding of the different needs of each area of the business. As a result, curriculums and delivery are flexible and non-traditional.

Developing the managers

In addition to other training activity, the airport identified a need to develop its line managers. In response, the college proposed running the Institute for Leadership and Management's (ILM) Level 3 award in first-line management. The course is accredited by the ILM and aims to give practising or potential first-line managers the foundation for formal development in their role.

The qualification develops basic management skills and assesses participants. Students must complete five units over a minimum of 34 guided learning hours within one year. Assessments include a work-based assignment set by the ILM. There are two mandatory units – 'solving problems' and 'making decisions' – as well as a choice from six modules the employer identified as being most appropriate to its needs, such as teambuilding, personal and team development, managing customer focus, working with budgets,

and understanding workplace communications. Importantly, this course has been structured around the work patterns of the staff and takes place at locations convenient for them, with teaching materials jointly branded to reinforce the partnership approach.

Growing the partnership

The UK's first foundation degree in airport and air transport management is being delivered in the CoVE training facility. The programme has been jointly developed by a number of companies based at the airport and Barnfield College. Glyn Jones believes that "if we can create a pool of people moulded in our own way" the business will see bottom-line benefits. The airport and college have appointed a tutor with experience of both the industry and education to lead the course.

The airport hosts numerous service companies, such as airlines, food preparation businesses and outsourced baggage handlers. The college has been proactive in forging links with these organisations, and the on-site training facility appeals to firms which currently use external private training providers. Most airport concourse companies are now interested in using the college as a training provider, having been impressed by its industry knowledge.

One airline was initially reluctant to take up the college's offer of an NVQ Level 2 qualification for its cabin crew, but the college mapped the company's own training standards against national standards. This persuaded the airline to offer the course. Moreover, the NVQ qualification is fast becoming the industry standard after the QCA and the sector skills council created an industry model with input from Barnfield. Once all of the company's cabin crew have been through the course, the college will offer it to other airlines – it believes its airport expertise is its unique selling point.

The college now provides a wide range of other courses to airport companies. These include Level 4 management courses for shop managers, IT and languages training for cabin crew, technical programmes for baggage handlers, culture-related courses for staff dealing with passengers from abroad, as well as certificates of professional development for other employees. The college also offers air fares and ticketing courses at three levels, airline food hygiene, health and safety, airline interview techniques, training on professional reservations systems, the ABTA Level 1 insurance exam

in additional travel and tourism services, and City and Guilds travel qualifications. While many courses are funded by the government, the cost of other programmes is covered by employers.

Courses can be delivered on-site at the airport and trainers can be sourced at any time of day or night, so shift-workers and those with unusual work patterns need not miss out on training. The assessors and tutors hail from industry, which enables them to make the content relevant. Glyn Jones believes that courses should if possible lead to qualifications: as they are portable and recognised, they boost morale and structure learning, as well as providing participants with an attainable focus. According to Helen Mayhew, NVQs are useful qualifications as they are nationally recognised and understood by employers, and they can be tailored for specific purposes.

Airport and college working together

Glyn Jones sits on the governing board of the college and the CoVE steering group. The employer steering group for the CoVE meets each term, made up of ten representatives from airport businesses, while the airport authority is responsible for the CoVE's strategic planning. A recent meeting planned a careers conventions for school leavers to showcase opportunities at the airport.

The college navigates the relevant funding routes, ensuring the airport and related businesses are not encumbered with administration. Occasionally, the college will run loss-making courses with a view to encouraging employers to take up other programmes – an approach that has paid dividends.

The airport is happy with the success of the relationship. "If it energises people, I'm delighted," says Glyn Jones, who believes that the employee satisfaction surveys at the airport and responses from managers have shown the training has worked. His prime intention is to bring everyone working at the airport up to a level sufficient to make them "functionally highly competent", before moving on to more specialised areas.



Basingstoke College of Technology (BCOT) has re-evaluated its employer engagement strategy and restructured its operational activities to be more responsive to employers' needs. The impetus for the extensive changes at the college was twofold: the need to put employers at the heart of its approach to providing training and to improve efficiency in its operations. The college's new approach includes forming key partnerships with other colleges and private sector providers to extend its offering to industry.

Organisational change to meet employer needs

Over the past couple of years, BCOT has been changing how it meets local employers' training and skills needs. External recognition of its evolving, responsive strategy initially came in the form of its 'action for business' award in March 2006. Now superseded by the new TQS, the action for business kitemark was awarded to colleges demonstrating their flexibility and responsiveness in supporting employment and individual employers. Nationally, just 27 colleges received the award. Director of business development Alan Gwyer says that to win the kitemark the college had to demonstrate its commitment, capacity and ability to deliver and shape provision to meet local employers' requirements.

Employers are at the heart of the college's activities – a vision that strongly influences BCOT's management structure and operations. The new ways of working at the college have required considerable cultural change on the part of staff in how they deal with employers. One step-change is that the employer is now seen as the primary client along with the learner.

Until recently, there were two separate business units dealing with employer engagement and apprenticeship activities at the college. These have now been merged to form one integrated business department. This was one of the first actions taken by Alan Gwyer

on assuming responsibility for employer engagement: "Previously there was a great deal of duplication in our dealings with employers. For example, one employer could be visited by a number of different college personnel. Our approach is being streamlined so that there is one key account manager responsible for each client." It is envisaged that this account management approach will act as a quality control measure for the college's relationships with employers. Previously, the important relationship between a company and the college was often managed at an operational rather than a strategic level by the lecturer or assessor delivering the training. This meant it was difficult to adopt an organisational development approach to fulfilling the company's training requirements and problems could get out of hand because the delivery staff did not have the authority to sort things out.

In BCOT's experience, most employers want training that is government-funded, or at least subsidised. Although the business department offers employers a wide range of full-cost training tailored to their needs, such provision is expensive to develop. According to Alan Gwyer, it is possible to offer free training for most of the general workforce for many employers by drawing down funding on the client's behalf.

Structuring the business department

There are some 20 full-time employees working in the business unit. Their workloads and responsibilities are currently focused on four main sectors – care, business programmes, health and safety, and hospitality. It is envisaged that, as the restructuring of the unit progresses, the number of sectors will increase and be merged with the apprenticeship areas. In this way, there will be one key person responsible for all training and development activities in each sector, be it NVQs, apprenticeships or bespoke training. Quality control will be an important aspect of ensuring the business department, the college and any external contractors fulfil BCOT's employer engagement strategy. This will be helped by the tight management structure in the business department.

The business department is entirely self-funding, relying on the income it generates for its budget. For example, last year £2.5m of the college's income from work-based training – some 10% – was derived from providing bespoke, full-cost training. The department does not operate any kind of incentive system to encourage business unit staff to generate new business, nor does it plan to do so.

“In my experience, financial incentives can cause more disruption than they are worth because if they are based on securing new work, staff can neglect existing clients unless the reward system is very tightly managed,” Alan Gwyer comments. “The best way to meet employers' needs is to employ permanent staff who are properly managed and motivated through teamwork and staff development to work to the highest professional standards. Under the new model for the business department, however, there will be targets for staff to generate a certain level of income to encourage accountability and a focus on building business opportunities.”

The whole college offer

BCOT's employer engagement strategy is referred to as the 'whole college offer'. To achieve this vision operationally, it's important that business department personnel are able to talk to clients with confidence about the full range of training and learning opportunities that the college can provide.

To help staff gain confidence and to encourage them to suggest other ways the college can help meet an employer's skills needs, Alan Gwyer has developed an internal information sheet. This includes key facts about the main learning routes, such as adult apprenticeships, apprenticeships, foundation degrees and full-cost training. It then itemises their applicability to type of employee, the cost to employers, the benefits and college contact details for each learning route. When visiting an employer, a business department representative can use the document to ensure the full range of appropriate learning provision has been relayed to the client. The business department has monthly meetings to share information and ensure everyone is up-to-date on its employer engagement activities.

“This is a revolution in how we work and we are only half way on our journey,” says Gwyer. “A lot of the change is attitudinal. For example, it is a huge shift for people in education to view the employer as the main client and for us to be concerned with the impact of our work on the business as well as on the individual. I am sure there will be many challenges along the way.”



Working in partnership to optimise training delivery

The college works increasingly with outside contractors to deliver its full range of training provision to employers. For example, all the health and safety training offered by BCOT is delivered by external consultants or private providers. This reflects the increasing requirement for specialist training provision on the part of employers. “We currently work with over 30 different individual consultants and firms to ensure that we provide top class professional expertise to our company clients,” Alan Gwyer comments. “Nearly all our training is delivered on company premises as, again, that is the format required by employers – it is all about meeting employers’ precise requirements.” In this way, the college is in effect acting as a brokerage service and providing its customers with access to top quality training in specialisms that no local college could support on its own.

For the past two years, BCOT has also been working with other colleges to expand its potential offerings to employers. “Because of the local nature of how most FE colleges operate, it is often difficult to work with employers that have multiple sites in different parts of the country,” Gwyer explains. “By working with other colleges we can improve and extend our provision and be more responsive to employers.”

One example is how BCOT has been working with the NHS in Hampshire. The NHS trusts previously had 17 contracts with different colleges to deliver a wide range of training provision. Now the main contract is with BCOT, which acts as a broker for the 232 different NVQs and 105 other qualifications delivered by four FE colleges across Hampshire. This means the NHS has to deal with just one main contract, contact and invoice, streamlining the process for the client. The arrangement involves a set fee paid to the colleges through BCOT, as the other FE colleges involved invoice BCOT for the training they have delivered. “Our aim is to replicate this kind of partnership on a bigger scale across the south east,” Alan Gwyer says. “Ideally this would mean a network of colleges across the area working together to deliver region-wide education to employers with multiple locations – it would provide us with much greater reach and allow us to compete with national private providers. Although FE colleges have been around for over 60 years, there is still no national FE service that an employer can access through a single portal.”

Another example of BCOT’s subcontracting model is its training arrangement with CooperVision, a US global company that makes contact lenses. The college is acting as the broker to deliver business improvement techniques to the 700-strong workforce at CooperVision. This is a specialist training requirement and BCOT uses a consultant company, Keizai, that is expert in the field. The college’s role, apart from acting as the primary contact and broker, is to help CooperVision to draw down Train to Gain funding to train its workforce.

Marketing BCOT to employers

What BCOT is trying to achieve with its new business department arrangement is “a private training model within an FE college structure”. In order to achieve this, Gwyer has no doubt that greater efficiency can be built into its operations. This has already in part been achieved by developing the “whole college offer” and reducing the amount of duplication in time and resources devoted to dealing with employers. It also improves the level of service provided to clients.

BCOT has an extensive website for business. It also advertises what it can offer employers on a regular basis. A lot of its business relies on word of mouth and repeat work with clients. It is envisaged that, as part of the ongoing restructuring of the business department, two members of staff will have responsibility for sales, so that marketing activity will be more focused.

According to Alan Gwyer, the key to successful promotion of the college is in building long-term relationships with employers: “This does not involve quick sales – it is about using our existing links and networks to develop and extend our offer. This is a complicated undertaking: for example, each sector has its own way of operating so it is important that we have people with an in-depth knowledge of the different parts of industry.”

Evaluating the impact of employer engagement work

According to Alan Gwyer, the key focus of the new Training Quality Standard is impact, the difference that a college’s training provision makes to the business. “Historically, the focus has always been on the learner and the impact of learning and development has been evaluated on an individual basis in terms of success rates etc. The TQS will rightly force providers to evaluate the effects of their training delivery on the organisation and consider key business performance measures such as staff retention, productivity, increased repeat business, fewer complaints and so on. Our approach now is to use the training needs analysis as a first step to evaluate what the company’s requirement is so that the training and development can contribute to organisational effectiveness through upskilling staff, who of course still benefit from the greater confidence and increased levels of performance that training brings.” Assessing the long-term organisational impact of a learning and development intervention is a challenging area for any training provider, but one that BCOT is preparing to meet.

Key features of Basingstoke College

Basingstoke College of Technology has 1,800 full-time and 7,000 part-time students, including 350 apprentices studying at the college. BCOT has worked with up to 1,500 employers as part of its employer engagement strategy. Last year, the college delivered some £2.5m worth of off-site training to organisations.

It has achieved certification (with excellence in construction) under the new Training Quality Standard (TQS). The college offers training provision including NVQs, apprenticeships and other national awards across a wide range of disciplines and vocations, ranging from accountancy and health and safety to marketing and retail.





From a standing start a decade ago, **Burton College** has pursued employer engagement as a strategic objective. It has focused on building long-term partnerships with local employers such as JCB, for which the college now delivers a range of programmes.

An established agenda of engagement

Employer engagement has been a strategic aim of the college for the past decade. Its adoption coincided with restructuring of the management and a re-evaluation of corporate priorities.

“One of our core aims at the time was to play a leading role in the economic development of the area,” says Keith Norris, principal and chief executive. “We sought to deliver the skills needed by companies and to be an active partner in, for example, the chamber of commerce, Young Enterprise and discussions about issues that had an impact on business. This is the agenda we’ve been adhering to for about 11 years, and it sends out a powerful message about what we aim to be as a college – without detracting from our more general provision.”

Engagement developed on an evolutionary, rather than a revolutionary, basis with the college forming a number of partnerships with local employers. Arrangements initially took a relatively conventional approach, with trainees coming into college on day-release to follow programmes based on company needs. This has evolved over the years with staff going out to the business community to provide delivery in the workplace.

“Where we could, we aimed to develop long-term partnerships with employers, rather than carrying out one-off programmes and then moving on to the next company,” says Norris. “JCB is a good example of a sustained partnership, but we have also worked closely with companies such as Toyota, Unilever Bestfoods, Johnson Controls, LH Plant Group, Coors, Marston’s and Bison Concrete Products for some time too.”

Partnerships with employers have taken a number of years to evolve. They have required close personal relationships between staff at the college and company representatives, which has built up understanding and trust. In the case of JCB, the college began the relationship by providing health and safety courses, but it evolved so the college started delivering HNCs programmes for the company. “It’s just continued to move on from there,” says Keith Norris.

Employer engagement unit

Although the early contacts with business stemmed from personal contacts made by the principal, part of the restructuring included setting up an employer engagement unit. This is responsible for activities such as apprenticeships, Train to Gain programmes, short courses, bespoke courses and essential skills programmes for companies’ employees (eg health and safety). The unit has a team of people who manage and monitor work with employers. They also have responsibility for bringing in new business.

The unit consists of a director of employer engagement and marketing, a manager and ten people who work directly with employers as ‘market makers’. There is also a member of staff responsible for identifying and accessing external funding sources and three administrative staff.

Funding sources

A variety of funding sources are accessed to run programmes arranged by the college for employers. These include full-cost programmes (eg specific skills-based training programmes customised to meet the needs of an employer), HEFCE-funded foundation degree courses, apprenticeships currently funded by the Learning and Skills Council, Train to Gain programmes and programmes supported by the European Social Fund to assist, for example, language skills development among employees who do not have English as their first language.

Balancing staffing pressures

As external delivery of programmes by the college has increased, there has been a need for a ‘new breed’ of academic staff. These need to be willing to work with employers in a far more flexible way than ‘traditional’ lecturers, who would anticipate students attending courses at college and working regular hours. Staff who deliver in the workplace are line-managed by the four faculties (eg engineering staff working with JCB or Toyota report to the head of technology). But deployment of staff by the college in response to training and development needs of employers – especially short-term programmes – can be challenging and can create tensions over staffing.

Teaching staff need to be fully utilised, so those who have been assigned to work in business may need to be deployed in the delivery of mainstream courses at the college until such times as external opportunities arise. “If our employer engagement unit brings in new business that requires delivering quickly, how do you facilitate this without jeopardising the quality of the ‘core business’? We’ve cracked it with apprenticeships because the programmes are relatively stable and numbers are predictable, so we have staff who do nothing else but assess apprentices externally – there’s enough work with several employers to achieve constancy,” says Norris. “But a new Train to Gain contract with large numbers of employees to deal with in a six-month period is a very different staffing proposition.”

Norris believes Train to Gain may seem ‘demand-led’ but if this approach were relied on, the college would not be winning much new business. “Employers are not queuing up as customers. ‘Demand-led’ for us means we’ll deliver what the employer wants once the organisation appreciates the role of training in achieving its objectives,” says Norris. “This only comes about by long-term relationships and companies wanting to work with a stable institution, which many local business leaders may have attended in the past, rather than have quick-fix training solutions from private providers who may go in and out and then move on to the next customer.”

The college has a bank of associate lecturers it can call on for staffing flexibility should a new client materialise at short notice. In addition, it is seeking wherever possible to achieve flexibility in delivery of Train to Gain programmes by training key employees in the companies themselves in assessment techniques to work alongside college staff. “This will give employees enhanced skills and confidence, provide greater stability and ease the pressure on our staffing,” says Keith Norris.

Development of foundation degrees

Over eight years ago, JCB approached the college about its need for engineers with higher levels of skills than it was able to find in the recruitment market. Initially, the possibility of an engineering HNC was discussed, tailored to the company’s needs and delivered at JCB’s site. This was agreed and delivered by the college. The programme was designed to develop existing employees who were either experienced workers on the production line or team leaders.

The HNC was later joined by an HND programme which enabled progression. The company also adopted a more systematic approach in identifying employees who would take part in the programmes. Both programmes ran for several years before they were replaced. The college also developed a six-month bridging course on the principles of engineering to ensure employees were at a suitable level to undertake the HNC and HND programmes. The bridging course continues to be run when necessary, in preparation for the foundation degree.

Building on its experience, the college has developed an engineering foundation degree with JCB to suit the needs of the company and to replace the existing HNC and HND programmes. It consists of modules jointly designed by representatives of the company and college academic staff. Much of the content owed its origins to the programmes it was replacing.

The foundation degree began in 2004, validated by Staffordshire University. Cohorts of about 14 or 15 employees, chosen by JCB, begin the programme each year, which takes place at the company. It involves one half-day a week of sessions delivered by tutors from the college and also some early evening work. The course takes three to four years to complete, with the first group of employees graduating in 2008. Employees awarded the foundation degree can progress to an honours degree course if they wish.

Similar foundation degree courses are run at the college on an open basis, which attract delegates from other employers. “Not everything has to be delivered in the workplace. Many employers prefer having their employees off-site, using our specialist facilities and mixing with delegates from other companies,” says Keith Norris.

Programmes for sponsored undergraduates

JCB regularly provides industrial placements of up to a year at the company for a number of undergraduates taking sandwich degree courses in engineering. Several years ago, the company talked to the college about the idea of a short preparatory or induction course prior to the students beginning their placements. The college responded by shaping a suitable programme which has evolved over the years, and courses have taken place each year over a six-week period during the summer at the college. The course is full-time, intensive and involves up to 12 students who JCB sponsors through university from the second year onwards.

“Prior to the course, JCB found that students going into the company for their placements had all the theory, but no ability in or understanding of practical engineering,” says Norris. “This was denting their confidence and meant they weren’t entering the workplace on a strong footing, putting them at a disadvantage with existing employees on the production lines.”

The course teaches undergraduates practical engineering skills (eg use of lathes and milling machines) as well as the theory behind the skills, and takes place mainly in the college machine shops. As part of the course, students produce individual project work, and at a later stage work together in small teams on a design-and-build project. These are prepared within a set budget and may, for example, illustrate mechanical systems (eg gearboxes, mechanical linkages and hydraulic systems) that can be used during design technology lessons in secondary schools.

As part of the course, the company has a number of associate tutors who assist development of students' presentation skills, while JCB employees provide support in the use of computer-aided design techniques. On completion, students make presentations about their project at JCB to a group of senior managers. Throughout the programme, students are assessed for NVQ engineering qualifications.

"It's paid off for us; when students make presentations at JCB, the managers have expressed their surprise at what has been produced at Burton College at such a high standard after just a few months," says Keith Norris. "It's been a big success and has been developed, like so many of our programmes, as a result of long-term commitment to business engagement in the region."

"Prior to the course, JCB found that students going into the company for their placements had all the theory, but no ability in or understanding of practical engineering."

Key features of Burton College

The college was formed in 1948 and is located a short distance from Burton-on-Trent town centre. It is a general further education college that covers a broad range of curriculum areas and industrial specialisms. The college offers over 500 courses, including A level, Diploma, NVQ and HND programmes, vocational training and leisure courses. It delivers training and assessment in all of the sector skills areas, apart from the land-based sector.

The college has about 12,000 students on its books and approximately 500 teaching staff. Of the 3,200 full-time students, approximately 2,800 are 16-19 year-olds. The great majority of students are part-time, many of whom attend on release from local employers. Burton College is organised in four faculties: technology; business, leisure and care; sixth form and skills for life; and creative studies.

JCB seeks to raise the bar in engineering

Founded in 1945 by Joseph Cyril Bamford, JCB is one of the three largest manufacturers of construction equipment in the world. The company has an outstanding reputation for the design, innovation and quality of its product range of over 300 different machines and vehicles. It is also one of the few global brands that has remained a family-owned business. JCB has 17 factories in the UK, Brazil, North America, India, China and Germany, and operations in 150 countries – in many the company is the leader in its field. The company employs 8,000 people worldwide, 5,500 of them in the UK.

The company has a strong commitment to the training and development of its workforce, from junior apprentices to its senior managers and directors. It has a number of training initiatives for managers, such as an accredited leadership programme run in conjunction with the Chartered Management Institute, and uses other external providers in areas such as numeracy and literacy skills training. The company also provides its own programmes to develop the potential of employees. These include, for example, a course at NVQ Level 2 for over 280 team leaders working in production.

In addition to its employee development programmes, it works externally with schools, colleges and universities. A major project being developed at present is the JCB

Academy for 14-19-year-old pupils, due to open in 2010. It will have an emphasis on engineering, manufacturing and business and is being developed in conjunction with four local authorities. The academy is located in historic buildings close to JCB's headquarters in Rocester, Staffordshire.

Links with Burton College

For many years JCB has had close ties with Burton College and a number of its current development programmes are run in conjunction with the college. "There is a willingness to listen to our requirements at Burton College," says David Bell the group HR director. "Where others might tell us what we can have off the shelf, the college will send in people to deliver programmes tailored to our development needs. That's a big difference, and their ethos is in developing the local business community."

Undergraduate programme

JCB is currently sponsoring about 50 undergraduates who are at different stages of their engineering sandwich degree courses. Commenting on the preparatory programme run by Burton College for these students before they begin their work placements, Paul Pritchard, former head of learning and development and now head of the JCB Academy project, says, "Even though we select the universities where we sponsor undergraduates with care, we found

that many were not ‘streetwise’ for work in manufacturing and had insufficient practical knowledge. Despite some of them working towards an engineering masters, their study experience was all based on theory. We couldn’t put them on the shopfloor until they had some practical engineering skills. The induction programme at Burton bridges the gap.”

The company has found the programme to be “extremely valuable” by way of introduction to the placement. Once this starts, students are rotated every three months between four of the company’s seven different functions, such as production, manufacturing, purchasing, sales and marketing and finance. At the end, when the students graduate and look back, the company reports that many describe the Burton College course as one of the most significant influences during their undergraduate years.

Foundation degree

Following the introduction of the concept of foundation degrees, Burton College took the initiative to suggest to JCB that a course could be developed which could be tailored far more closely to meet the company’s requirements than the previous HNC and HND programmes.

“The director of engineering went through the syllabus presented to us by the college,” says Paul Pritchard. “It was found, for example, that it didn’t include anything about hydraulic systems, so that had to be added as we use so many in the machines we manufacture, and there were omissions in electronic control systems – so that was included too. This was the main method we used to ensure the curriculum covered our needs. Ever since, the efficacy of the degree has proved itself and we now have over 60 employees who have graduated.”

Employees are selected to take part in the foundation degree programme based on applications in response to advertisements displayed in the company. These outline the opportunity, what the commitment will be, and explain the need for restrictions on the number of applicants accepted from any one area of the business to avoid disruption. Applicants, who have to have the support

of their line manager, are put through a preliminary assessment to determine if they are at a suitable level to undertake the programme. For those not selected there is an option to take on extra development in the areas of weakness so that they may apply again the following year.

“Where there have been issues with Burton College about the foundation degree, or any of the other programmes, we have a sufficiently good relationship with them to express our views and have them resolved,” says Ken Stepney, head of learning and development. “This is down to the senior team at the college that drive the programmes and who jump on an issue to ensure its satisfactory resolution.”

A major health and safety programme?

JCB is negotiating with Burton College about the provision of a British Safety Level 2 Health and Safety course that would be delivered throughout the entire UK operation (11 sites, mainly located a short distance from JCB’s headquarters). “The college is coming close to shaping up something that could meet our needs. If we do go ahead with them, it will have a big impact on the business,” says Ken Stepney. “It will raise workforce awareness and knowledge of an especially important subject and would be provided by an educational organisation that can access central funds to help in its delivery. It’s another indication of the flexible attitude adopted by the college, its willingness to listen and respond to business needs, and to focus on local employers.”

Limits of the partnership

Despite its enthusiasm and willingness to work in partnership with the college, the company does have frustrations about some centrally directed training initiatives over which the college has no control. David Bell, for example, expresses his concerns about the rapid succession of different lower-level training initiatives and a lack of government programmes aimed at developing the engineering and business abilities of supervisors and team leaders – the group of employees most likely to ensure companies – and the UK – compete effectively in world markets.

“We can deliver for ourselves the type of training that is necessary for these employees, but we could do it much faster if there was support at this level,” says Bell. “We’ve tried finding public funds to help, but we’ve given up looking and are just going ahead on a more reduced scale than we would have liked. But what we’re doing does need external validation and recognition. It would be helpful if government programmes were demand-led, rather than what appear to be product-led initiatives, which Burton College has to adapt to in order to gain funding.”



When Big Studio Glass Design needed staff to be trained in use of a new kiln for its glassworking activities, it turned to **Cleveland College of Art & Design** for help. The college put together a tailored employee development programme, running sessions initially within the company and then at its Hartlepool campus.

Reaching out to business

Employer engagement is important to Cleveland College of Art & Design (CCAD), especially in the development of foundation degrees. Preparatory research by the college for the degrees was carried out with employer input and industry liaison groups to ensure the continuing relevance of course content.

In addition to the BA and FdA courses, the college provides training opportunities for the creative industries. Businesses, freelancers and individual artists are encouraged to use the college's services in developing and raising their own skill levels or those of their employees. Referrals come from a range of sources – for example, Business Link and the Learning and Skills Council, the industry's professional bodies, enquiries made via the college website, internal referrals from academic staff, and spin-offs from general marketing activities for short course programmes.

CCAD has reached out to creative industries in the locality by:

- Publishing and circulating a 'Business Solutions' brochure setting out its offering
- Employing an external marketing organisation to develop a wider marketing and promotion strategy, supported by a grant from the regional development agency
- Arranging a 'focus day' for creative industries' employers to help them identify training needs
- Providing taster sessions to give a flavour of learning programmes on offer.

Working around capacity issues

Despite its commitment to an employer-led agenda, there are practical constraints on the college's ability to respond as much as it might wish. It has limited physical accommodation for ad-hoc teaching programmes as well as limits on the availability of academic staff. "Every room here is timetabled. There's usually nowhere even for me to hold a meeting with an employer about their requirements. It's a real constraint," says Melanie Shee, business development manager for the creative industries. (The college is currently working on plans for new premises to be developed within the next three years.) Another issue is around the FE contracts of service that require all staff to fulfil a high teaching requirement. "Staff are timetabled fully every day to support full-time courses, so there are issues over people being able to develop and respond to requests for training from industry."

To overcome lack of availability of in-house staff, other organisations such as Tees Valley Arts have been drafted in to develop taster sessions. The college has also drawn up a register of staff who can be called on to respond to a training delivery need for short tailored courses, such as part-time lecturers who can provide some extra hours or technician demonstrators who are qualified teachers.

"We have to ask ourselves continually whether we have the facilities for delivery and if so, if they're available at the right time, and if we can find the staff who have the time and want to work with employers," says Shee. "Many permanent staff would be delighted to work with employers, but they just can't fit everything into their timetables. We thought the accommodation hurdle could be overcome by

delivering at companies – after carrying out a health and safety risk assessment of the employer’s premises – but this isn’t always possible if the company has no dedicated learning area.”

Identifying a training need

One of CCAD’s first employer engagement initiatives was developed with Big Studio Glass Design. This came about as a result of an exploratory meeting between the managing director of the company and senior representatives of the college. On the agenda were work experience, technical briefings and work-based learning. The company noted that the college was already running a short open course on creative glasswork using kilns, which the company had considered suitable for its employees. Due to overriding commitments however, none of its staff had been able to attend the course. This prompted discussion about the possibility of a customised programme.

“Many permanent staff would be delighted to work with employers, but they just can’t fit everything into their timetables.”

Following several further meetings and conversations to determine needs and requirements, a practical ‘fused and slumped glass’ programme was devised specifically for the company. It was to be delivered to between three and six employees who normally worked with ‘cold working’ glass processes and had limited experience of kiln work. It was hoped that their involvement in the programme would lead to new products and markets for the company.

Development of the programme was funded by the Higher Level Skills Pathfinder initiative – a regionally based three-year pilot project started in 2006 and funded by HEFCE, which supports HE providers in engaging with employers.

Customised programme

The 30-hour programme focused on kiln-formed glass, and aimed to develop participants’ mould making and ‘slumping’ techniques in the creation of flat glass and three-dimensional forms. Programme content was designed to suit the needs of industry, as opposed to those of individual artists working on a small scale, so it provided more technical detail than was offered in the existing open course. It was unaccredited, but there was a high level of peer assessment and the college provided summary feedback based on project work and finished products. The college estimated that the course content was equivalent to Level 4.

In return for providing the programme, Big Studio offered the college the use of its industrial-sized kiln. It also offered to work with the college’s students to introduce them to the equipment and technology used in its work, and to provide some business training for students in glass art in a commercial environment.

Programme delivery

The programme began in December 2007 and was delivered by a tutor experienced in specialised creative glass techniques. It consisted of a series of ten, three-hour sessions, which continued to take place throughout the first half of 2008.

Initially, sessions were arranged at the company’s premises, but workplace noise levels made this difficult. After two sessions, it was transferred to the college to utilise spare room capacity on a Friday afternoon. “We won’t be able to offer this level of flexibility to every employer we work with in future,” says Shee. “The Big Studio programme was a pilot initiative that we’ve learned a great deal from, especially over commitment to the start and finish dates of the course.” The company had to make a large order a priority, and programme dates consequently slipped, causing some timetabling concerns. Despite this, the programme proved a success for both the company and CCAD, and the curriculum developed for this training programme will be amended and made available to other employers.

Key features of CCAD

For over 100 years, Cleveland College of Art & Design (CCAD), based at Middlesbrough and Hartlepool, has been delivering specialist art and design and media education in the north east of England. It is a ‘mixed economy group’ college, one of a number of FE institutions across England that offer a substantial number of higher education courses with direct funding from the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE). It is also one of only four colleges in the country that offers both HE and FE art and design education.

CCAD has approximately 500 HE and 600 FE students (all the FE students are based at its Middlesbrough campus). The Hartlepool campus is dedicated to higher education provision such as an honours degree in textiles and surface design and a foundation degree in commercial photography, validated by the University of Teesside.



Big Studio Glass Design creates a new approach

Big Studio Glass Design Ltd was founded in 2002 and is based in Hartlepool. The company designs and manufactures flat glass bespoke architectural features for offices, clubs, pubs, restaurants, hotels, shops and leisure facilities. These include doors, screens, signage, staircases and water features. Most are specially commissioned items that ‘make a big statement’ and are part of unique installations that incorporate textured and coloured glass, which often includes sandblasted patterns and images and ‘carving’ in glass. In addition, the company makes one-off glass trophies – including items for the Wimbledon lawn tennis museum.

Workforce background

Big Studio employs 12 people who are either designers or technicians turning concepts into finished products. Many of the designers have degree-level qualifications. While some technicians hold degrees, most join with A-level qualifications. Once at the company, external training and development opportunities for technicians are limited – many skills and techniques are learnt in-house from other members of staff.

“There can be difficulties in recruiting people on the technical side because you can’t come here ready skilled in what we do,” says managing director Suzi Dear. “People may understand about cutting and general glass processes, but to become familiar with our work, you need to be here learning and experiencing the approach we take. As an example, people can’t go on a glass sandblasting course – technicians have to develop their techniques ‘live’ in our workshops.”

New investment and new needs

Links with Cleveland College of Art & Design were prompted by the company’s desire to extend its product range by developing new techniques in handling glass – its established range of flat glass designs required only cold processing techniques. With the acquisition of its own premises several years ago, Big Studio took the decision to purchase a large industrial kiln – despite none of the staff having knowledge of slump glass processes that require heat treatment.

“We invested in the kiln because of the way we are – designers who are very practical and know about glass – so we thought it would be relatively easy to teach ourselves the necessary techniques in its use,” says Suzi Dear. “However, we found we didn’t know as much as we thought and that’s why the college was brought in to help. I taught there in earlier days so knew what they might be able to offer.”

Despite using the kiln to produce some experimental creative work, the company acknowledged the need to conform to British Standards and produce work of a consistently high quality that would – at the least – match that of slump glass products from elsewhere in the industry.

“At one point, we investigated training with the National Glass Centre in Sunderland – we have a good relationship with them. Unfortunately they could only offer courses at times when we needed to be working and this would have meant a great deal of downtime that we could not have afforded,” says Suzi Dear. “I also asked about a tailor-made course with one of their staff coming to our site for delivery, but they were unable to provide this.”

There were several deciding factors in choosing to work with the college, such as the degree of flexibility it was able to offer in delivery of the course, its close proximity to the company, personal contacts at the college and a history of students working at the company during summer holidays.

Training programme

Initially, the two parties visited each other’s premises to evaluate the options and check facilities would be suitable for the training programme. The company was able to specify at what level it considered training should be pitched to produce slump glass, which, despite existing highly developed experience in cold glass techniques, included going back to basics in kiln use.

The company also outlined the preferred form of course delivery. The course had an emphasis on hands-on demonstrations, presentations, discussions, practical workshops, studio-based teaching, group work, and individual and group tutorials. It was designed and agreed within four weeks, and ten three-hour sessions were scheduled to take place.

Commercial pressure

Committing employees to take part in the course had an impact on the company’s production schedules. While acknowledging the value of learning new techniques to extend the product range, there were times when it was not possible to follow the original programme for the course. Initially, it was planned that the course would take place over a ten-week period. But because of interruptions it actually spread over seven months. “We have customers who need work completed to a deadline – that’s what keeps the money coming in and keeps them happy – so there have been occasions when it’s been necessary to inform the college that it would not be possible for delegates to attend,” says Suzi Dear. “This was not always easy for the college, but they have been very understanding and we have tried to be flexible in the time of day when employees could go into the college.”

In addition to worries about noise levels at the company’s site, there were also concerns about safety aspects when large orders were being handled against tight deadlines. This precluded training sessions taking place at the same time as this work was going on at the Big Studio, resulting in the eventual switch to off-site delivery of the training.

Reflecting on the outcome

“Designers who participated in the course were keen to learn new techniques and, as a result of what they have learned, we now have another unique selling proposition that can go hand-in-hand with what we do currently,” says Suzi Dear. “It also offered individuals something different and bespoke to their needs. It’s helping them to compete with other designers elsewhere with something that’s new – there’s a lot of professional pride at stake in what they create.”

The company believes its designers will need additional training in the future to increase the techniques that have already been learnt from the course. “There are things that we can do now safely, but if a client were to ask for something that is up to three metres high and in multiple colours, we would be less confident,” says Suzi Dear. “To address this, the college might have to do a bit more research into the techniques needed in handling large-scale pieces. This may involve bringing in some third-party help, which would be of benefit to both ourselves and the college.”

Reflecting on the issue of assessment and accreditation, Suzi Dear believes that employees would appreciate taking part in further training over a more sustained period to develop higher level skills and would welcome more formal acknowledgement of the outcome.

Delegates were enthusiastic about attending the slump glass course and appreciated the techniques they learned, but they were often frustrated when unable to attend due to tight production commitments. A longer course could compound such frustrations and would require a commitment by the Big Studio to a specified schedule with the college. It would also call into question the most suitable venue: the college is conducive to uninterrupted sessions, but does not have a commercial size kiln; the company has the kiln, but it can be noisy and subject to interruptions. If higher-level training is to take place in the future, compromises will have to be made, and practical arrangements put in place that suit both the company and the college.

“I would advise any small creative glass business to take part in a similar programme to the one that we have done with CCAD. As designers it’s important to know what’s going on around you and to develop new techniques and skills so that you can keep ahead of the game,” says Suzi Dear. “It’s also important to be involved with colleges, not just for our benefit, but also for the students’ sake too, so that they come into contact with creative fields other than graphics and fashion. From a creative point of view, it’s just as satisfying working in glass as any other medium.”

Content of the customised programme

Planned sessions included:

- Gaining confidence in handling, cutting and making ‘frit’ (a form of ground glass used in glazing)
- Introduction to colour, the use of different forms of glass and laminating
- Introduction to mould making
- Experimentation with different inclusions to create effects within glass
- Introduction to enamels
- Development of project work and, over 15 hours of studio time, to design and make a decorative kiln glass panel (finished pieces were to include a variety of glass cuts, inclusions, different forms of glass, colour and to have made use of at least two firing cycles in the kiln)
- Summary of techniques acquired and evaluation of the final project.

In addition to the practical project, employees prepared portfolios that included:

- Designs and sketches
- Notes on personal research and sources of inspiration
- Technical notes on materials, processes, techniques and firing cycles
- Glass samples
- Annotated digital photographs.



In order to build effective employer engagement, **Cornwall College** has set up a centralised one-stop shop. Its streamlined approach has enabled the college to build successful partnerships with major businesses including food processor Tulip and china clay producer Imerys.

This case study examines how Cornwall College has set up a centralised work-based learning operation in order to streamline its skills offering to local employers. By establishing a single point of contact for its programmes, the college has been able to develop close partnerships with a range of client employers.

Setting up a work-based learning unit

In November 2006, the college launched Cornwall College Business (CCB), a new work-based learning operation designed to be a one-stop shop for employers accessing training and education for their staff. CCB consolidated several employer-facing units in the college and includes a section dealing exclusively with apprenticeships. As Ron Champion, CCB director, comments: “The college had too many brands going to market that confused employers. We wanted to create a more holistic offering and simplify the customer journey for employers who we view as the primary client. This was a business imperative.”

The rationale for establishing CCB was based on research carried out among employers in June 2006. Although the findings indicated strong employer allegiance to the college, they also revealed widespread confusion about locating the right point of contact. The college therefore set out to establish a ‘demand-led, needs-based’ approach to customise education to meet employers’ skills requirements. Ron Champion says that the college already had a good reputation for providing flexible and customised training because of its long-standing apprenticeship programmes, but CCB wanted to build on this tradition and extend it.

“We wanted to create a more holistic offering and simplify the customer journey for employers who we view as the primary client.”

The structure of CCB – a sizeable outfit employing over 70 people – is designed so key account managers develop long-term relationships with clients. The seven business development advisers (BDAs) each have responsibility for different key industry sectors. They aim to build up expertise in their sector and forge strong partnerships with local employers operating in it. In addition, as the principal brokers of business between the college and industry, the BDAs also develop strong links internally with relevant departments and people. CCB has a 24-hour response rate agreement with departments, whereby departments should respond to queries on courses within that timescale. As well as streamlining CCB’s – and employers’ – involvement with college departments, this key account approach enables employers to develop good practice by benefiting from the BDA’s sectoral expertise.

In addition to the business development section and an apprenticeship arm, CCB has a direct delivery unit – CCB In Company – that delivers training and consultancy services. CCB also has a client services team that handles all telephone enquiries from employers. There is a robust client relationship management (CRM) system in place, storing details of the college’s dealings with every client and accessible to relevant staff. The CRM system is considered critical for the smooth running of each relationship and avoiding overlap, one CCB employee referring to it as “the single point of truth”.

“The complexity of government and EU funding can be a maze for employers which CCB uses its expertise to simplify.”

Encouraging a workforce development solution

As part of its strategy for developing enduring relationships with employers and raising the skills base in Cornwall, CCB takes a ‘whole organisation’ approach to its dealings with employers. This means BDAs work in partnership with clients to look at training needs across the workforce to see where value can be added. Before CCB was set up, the approach was more likely to have been one involving a single offering from whichever faculty had dealings with the employer. It is now more typical for CCB to cross-sell from the wide range of course provision on offer across the college and develop a whole programme of interventions for an employer over a period of time. This approach reflects the ‘value-added’ ethos of CCB as opposed to a more sales-oriented approach.

Tamsyn Harris, head of business development, says that a BDA’s role is wide-ranging and involves acting in partnership with the client: “It is essential that we go out to the employer and help them develop training solutions. But we would never show them the prospectus as a first call. Designing an appropriate intervention means listening to the client and assessing any skills gaps in the context of that company’s business goals, performance management system and other organisational factors. We would also talk to the learners to assess their needs and expectations, and have a dialogue with line managers as they are critical to the implementation of any training programme.” The training provision offered by the college covers a wide spectrum, from highly tailored and lengthy interventions to three-hour training sessions and open NVQ programmes. CCB also supports its clients through the intricacies of the funding routes available. The complexity of government and EU funding can be a maze for employers which CCB uses its expertise to simplify.

Offering clients flexibility

Flexibility in design and delivery of training programmes is considered fundamental to CCB’s approach. Tamsyn Harris cites the example of Tulip, a large food manufacturing and processing company, for which the college is providing a wide portfolio of interventions. While keen to upskill its workforce in a number of different areas, as a manufacturer it can be difficult to take operatives away from frontline production activities. For one of the NVQs it is delivering, the college has customised the course so that it is a more accelerated programme. The college assessors have also moved away from the paper-based portfolio that is a typical course requirement and included more witness testimonials, photographic evidence and one-to-one sessions between employees and assessors to minimise disruption to the business.

Offering a flexible and responsive service to clients can be challenging in resource terms. Ron Champion says a balance has to be struck between having the assessors and trainers at the ready to meet a client’s needs and longer-term resourcing issues. For example, it can occasionally be difficult to source the right number and quality of assessors – as an illustration of the scale of provision that is sometimes needed, at Tulip there are currently four assessors based on-site at the company full-time. But CCB’s employer engagement model of developing long-term partnerships with clients also helps.

Tamsyn Harris says that because of the more strategic nature of CCB’s dialogue with companies, there are usually no last-minute demands on the college’s learning delivery – there is a continuous dialogue taking place about that company’s skills base and future training needs. For example, the county fire and rescue service always provides CCB with its annual training plan, so the college knows exactly what the organisation’s expectations are for training delivery. The college can also call on sessional tutors to help meet peaks in demand.

Looking to the future

CCB is pleased with how established its brand has become externally within such a short space of time. According to Ron Champion, there is more work to be done internally to embed the still relatively new approach to marketing and delivering work-based learning. Part of this awareness-raising involves championing the employer as the main client rather than the learner, which is the more traditional perspective in FE. The unevenness in identifying with the CCB brand internally is partly inevitable, as some departments have less provision suitable for the employer market and so have less contact with the new unit. Changes are afoot to improve internal communications across the board, such as streamlining the 12 current faculties into six and the introduction of subject leads. These will be staff allocated responsibility for key curriculum areas within the college.

Fundamentally, the three-way relationship between employer, CCB and college departments is working well in practice. The college benefits from its in-depth contact with industry and is in a much better position to develop its curricula to ensure they remain relevant and up-to-date. When appropriate, BDAs will involve staff from the faculty on their visits so employers benefit from expert input at the design stage of training provision.

Key features of Cornwall College

Established in 1929 to meet the training needs of local industry, Cornwall College now has some 45,000 students, a £70m annual turnover and is one of the largest further and higher education colleges in the UK.

Work-based learning is an important focus for the college, representing over 10% of its annual turnover. In 2001, Cornwall College and St Austell College merged to form the Cornwall College Group, creating cross-county education and training provision. The majority of its courses – ranging from agriculture and engineering to outdoor pursuits and business administration – are validated by the University of Plymouth. The college holds CoVEs in three industry areas – marine engineering, tourism/customer care and food and drink – and the new Training Quality Standard for its IT programmes.

Cornwall College's mission is focused on contributing to economic growth in the region. The college is closely involved in supporting 'Objective One' projects in training and education – an EU initiative intended to narrow the gap with wealthier regions.

Tulip and CCB: working together to deliver workforce-wide training

As part of the Danish Crown Group, Tulip is one of Europe's largest manufacturers and processors of meat. Employing over 2,000 people in its Cornwall operation, the company is one of the county's biggest employers. The company has a long association with Cornwall College, but in April 2007 this association became more formalised when it embarked on a comprehensive, long-term training programme for the whole workforce in collaboration with the college. This followed the realisation by the company that there was a need to upskill and develop the workforce to ensure it was adaptable to future business requirements.

Cornwall College won the contract in competition against six other potential providers, and now provides 85% of the company's training. As Christine Powell, divisional human resources manager, comments: "We did not just award the contract, but made the tendering organisations work for it. Tulip views this as a long-term partnership and so it was vital that we found a supplier that could meet our ongoing training requirements."

Selecting a training partner

The key criteria Tulip was looking for in a training partner were flexibility, quality, an in-depth understanding of the business and willingness to work in partnership. According to Christine Powell, Cornwall College and CCB have delivered on all counts: "This is a 24/7 business with tight production deadlines. We need a high-quality training provider with commercial awareness and the ability to fit in with our work schedules. It used to be perceived that colleges couldn't work the long hours that business needed, but that has been turned on its head by Cornwall College, who are prepared to tailor the design and delivery of programmes to suit our operations. NVQ assessors are even prepared to go on the night shift if necessary."

In November 2007, the Cornwall division of Tulip signed the Skills Pledge, committing the company to training all employees to reach NVQ Level 2. But the company's skills vision exceeds this target. This is illustrated by the wide range of programmes – nearly all of which are externally accredited – that Cornwall College currently delivers to employees. The programmes include a number of health and safety qualifications, such as NEBOSH and IOSH, as well as ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses – some 45% of the Cornish Tulip workforce are migrant workers. In addition to various NVQs at Level 2 in areas such as food and drink manufacturing, there is the scope for employees to reach Level 3 in vocations like engineering, where there are acute skills shortages.

An evolving programme

Initially, the overarching training programme devised by Tulip and CCB's business development manager focused on equipping staff at the frontline with immediate job-related skills, but as the programme is evolving it is incorporating other areas and meeting wider business needs. Tulip's Cornwall division views NVQ Level 2 as a platform from which staff can progress to higher-level skills, if appropriate. Another example is management training. Around 80 people have successfully completed the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) qualification in team leadership and the NVQ Level 2, but there is the opportunity to progress to more advanced management programmes such as a Certificate in Management and NVQ Level 3. Most of the training is delivered at the company's premises – even the management programme – but if training involves an open programme run by Cornwall College, it is delivered at one of the college's campuses.

The ILM course is a good example of how Cornwall College has helped to steer Tulip's choice of training programmes through the various funding routes. The NVQ Level 2 part of the qualification draws down funding for the programme that also helps fund the three-day ILM course, so giving participants two qualifications rather than one. The majority of the programmes delivered to Tulip employees attract external funding, a significant advantage in a sector operating within tight margins. Because the funding framework is complicated and eligibility has to be assessed at the level of the individual, the college handles that part of the contract and invoices Tulip for any participants or courses that are not externally funded.

“The programme is constantly changing and growing from month to month.”

Managing the partnership

Although the tendering process for the contract was robust, since Tulip made its choice of preferred supplier, there has been a minimum of bureaucracy and paperwork to contend with. There is an initial contract agreed as a result of the tender and regular review meetings take place to manage ongoing training requirements as opposed to booking forms for each individual element. Christine Powell explains that having the partnership and range of training interventions set in stone would not be feasible, as the programme is constantly changing and growing from month to month. This does not mean that the company neglects close monitoring of the college's ongoing training provision, but this is carried out primarily from a partnership perspective.

A steering group, comprising company and college representatives, was set up at the outset of the programme to ensure its smooth running. The group meets monthly and discusses every aspect of the training. Typically, the CCB account manager attends and other college representatives will also be present if their department is currently responsible for the delivery of any training to Tulip.

For its part, the college retains a wealth of documentation on its premises to ensure regulatory compliance. At each meeting, the steering group receives a full report on how each training intervention is progressing, and discusses any arising issues. If problems do occur, the steering group acts as the forum to resolve these quickly. For example, the college recently delivered a new course that was not pitched at quite a high enough level for participants. Because it was a new intervention, the college was keen to receive feedback, and it has now refined the content to better meet the learning needs of the employees concerned.

A vibrant relationship

The success of Tulip's collaboration with Cornwall College was externally recognised in April 2008, when the company won the 'Train to Gain Employer of the Year' award in the South West Skills Awards 2008. While the focus for developing the partnership between Tulip and Cornwall College rests very much on Tamsyn Harris, as the account manager, and Christine Powell in her HR capacity, this "very vibrant working relationship" is backed up by the team of tutors, assessors, department heads and other college employees who help to translate Tulip's training strategy into practice.



Imerys makes Cornwall College its preferred provider

The china clay deposits in Cornwall have historically been the largest in the world and for many years were mined by English China Clays. The company has now become part of the French group, Imerys. Globally, Imerys has over 18,000 employees, with the 1,500-strong UK workforce based mainly in Cornwall. Imerys employs a variety of occupational groups in its south-west operation, ranging from scientists and technicians, drivers and engineers to support and professional staff.

A health and safety emphasis

Mining natural resources is a safety-critical business involving, for example, use of explosives and the handling of large machinery and electrical equipment. For this reason, three quarters of the training delivered to the workforce is related to health and safety and is a statutory requirement. Tracey Gay, learning and development co-ordinator at Imerys, explains that this training takes place on a continuous cycle and is refreshed every three to four years to ensure all employees are covered. The regulatory framework in which Imerys operates means that the company has a substantial annual training budget, with £398,000 spent on training in the first quarter of 2008 alone.

The company's working relationship with Cornwall College goes back over 20 years. But over the past couple of years, this relationship has become more formalised, with Imerys increasingly using the college to deliver the majority of its extensive training programmes. As well as a major NVQ Process Operations programme to meet statutory requirements, courses include programmes leading to NVQ Levels 2 and 3 in Business Administration, IOSH and NEBOSH awards, a BTEC in Operations and Maintenance Engineering and Process Manufacturing NVQ Level 3. Many of the programmes delivered by the college take place at Imerys' premises as they are assessor-led, but a few courses are held at one of the college's sites.

Choosing Cornwall College

There are a number of reasons why Cornwall College has become the preferred supplier. As Tracey Gay comments: "We wanted a provider that was local to reduce travel costs and could be flexible on the timing of courses. Another advantage is the wide range of courses on offer and the college's willingness to design bespoke programmes." Nearly all the courses delivered by the college are externally accredited, as Imerys now has a strong focus on providing training that gives employees a nationally recognised qualification. Most programmes attract some level of external funding, which can come from over 15 potential sources. The college accesses the funding on Imerys' behalf, saving the company a lot of work. College assessors also carry out an eligibility check on prospective learners to establish what amount of funding, if any, can be sourced externally.

Reviewing progress

Cornwall College and the company have set up a steering group to oversee the wide portfolio of courses delivered by the college to Imerys employees. The group is chaired by Tracey Gay and attendees include CCB's key account manager for Imerys as well as other key representatives from both organisations. Its objectives are "to review the progress and achievements of Imerys employees undertaking training programmes via Cornwall College" and "to discuss and take action on issues surrounding the delivery of NVQs via Cornwall College". Meeting monthly, the steering group takes its monitoring role seriously, receiving detailed reports on each course and ironing out any difficulties that may arise on individual programmes.

Tracey Gay emphasises that she works in partnership with the college to establish suitable processes for training delivery, with the college doing much of the work to design the content. For example, Cornwall College has just designed and delivered a bespoke course for Imerys managers on 'finance for non-financial managers'. A similar course used to be provided by a private training company, so Imerys already had a firm idea of what it wanted. After an initial meeting, college representatives designed the course and delivered a pilot to staff. To make the training bespoke, the one-day course focuses on a set of Imerys accounts. According to Tracey Gay, the preferred option is to make all training delivery as bespoke as possible, because contextualising the teaching and learning materials with reference to Imerys' operations makes them especially relevant.

"The college has shown it is willing and able to deliver to tight timescales."

Evaluating the partnership

Imerys is pleased with the progress of its partnership with Cornwall College and with the quality of the training programmes. As well as providing good value for money, the college has proved to be responsive and flexible to business needs, with assessors for example being prepared to travel on Sundays to Imerys' Yorkshire site to be ready to conduct NVQ assessments first thing on Monday. The college has also shown that it is willing and able to deliver to tight timescales.

The feedback from employees is also very positive, with many now having an enthusiasm for learning. Imerys has a key performance indicator that demands satisfaction rates of over 90% for all training programmes – this target has been exceeded every time on college-delivered courses. One slight criticism of the college is that its people are so eager to meet its client's needs and reluctant to disappoint, that occasionally time is wasted waiting for a proposal that can't be delivered by the college. Introduction of the subject leads there should, however, help to ensure a quicker response time.

With virtually all its training activities run off-site, the Corporate College of **Derby College** is focused on meeting the training needs of those aged 19-plus who are already in the workplace. Flexibility in delivery and a dedicated infrastructure have been central to growing its engagement with employers.

Wide reach

Corporate College is responsible purely for 19-plus provision – targeting specific areas of training. It holds CoVEs in engineering, construction, retail and IT. The college is the lead institution for the National Skills Academy for Engineering and is currently applying for similar status in retail skills provision. Up to 95% of training is delivered in the workplace, including Train to Gain contracts in the west midlands, east midlands, London and the north east.

Derby College is the product of a merger of three colleges. “Before the merger, things were done very differently at the colleges. For example, Wilmorton had large national hospitality contracts, whereas Mackworth had smaller more regional contracts,” says April Hayhurst, director of employer responsiveness. “The merger gave us the best of all worlds – we combined local provision with large national contracts – and it also brought in Mackworth’s international contracts in Libya, Iraq and Tunisia for HNC and HND engineering provision.”

Staffing for corporate work

The college has approximately 150 assessors and internal verifiers (some of whom are based in London and the north east) working on corporate projects plus a central support team of up to 50 people. These include the vice principal and senior leaders for marketing and management information systems, plus directors of the vocational directorates.

All the staff concerned work exclusively for Corporate College. Those involved in delivery are expected to meet clients’ scheduling requirements flexibly on a 24/7 basis throughout the year. The terms and conditions of employment for delivery staff are different from those of lecturers elsewhere in Derby College. Many staff have built up their industry-specific qualifications and experience, often in local firms, and subsequently gained qualifications in training delivery.

Keeping the business coming

New business is generated by an employer responsiveness team made up of key-account managers and sales advisers.

The key-account managers are responsible for ensuring repeat business from existing clients. They look for additional training needs during their monthly meetings with major clients and two-monthly telephone conversations with employers holding smaller accounts.

Sales advisers collect their own leads for new business. Sources of leads can include networking, referrals, cross-referrals based on third-party recommendations, cold calling, tele-sales and direct approaches from employers.

April Hayhurst says that the college focuses on two categories of potential clients:

- Plcs, some larger SMEs and statutory organisations that will stay loyal to the college whatever the funding arrangements
- Organisations that stay with the college providing programmes are cost-effective and consistently high standards are achieved.



Making the case for training

Up to 90% of the college's business is generated from repeat contracts. New business is usually won by promoting the return on investment demonstrated by existing client programmes.

“Recently, we entered into a contract with a company that employs just less than 200 people and has a turnover of about £11m. When I went to them I explained that we weren't there to sell them training, but that we were more interested in hearing what they wanted for the workforce and the business,” says Hayhurst. “We always start with a fact-finding exercise about all aspects of the organisation, carry out a skills assessment, and we ask employers what they think might happen to their success if they don't invest in training.”

April Hayhurst believes the latter is especially important as 70% of the workforce for 2020 is currently employed, many of whom have low skills. “Couple this with a gross shortage of people to employ by 2020, international competition and rising material, energy and labour costs, and under these circumstances, our role is to persuade employers that they have to have the best skilled workforce so they can face the future – and that's where we can help.”

Delivering programmes

Once agreement for new business is reached, the college seeks to offer cost-effective programmes that help develop employees, benefit the employer through enhanced efficiency and competitiveness, and avoid disrupting work activity and schedules as far as possible: “Typically, with new clients we enter into a ‘progression’ contract. We visit the employer to carry out a skills assessment on the shop-floor, let them know what the results of

this are and offer qualifications according to the needs, such as Entry Level 1 or Skills for Life,” says Hayhurst. “We then put people through a further assessment day, a ‘skills scan’, at no cost. For those who do not meet funding requirements, a subsidised fee is charged on a sliding scale according to number of employees and longevity of contract.”

After this, the college may progress some employees onto a business improvement techniques qualification on a charged basis – from a menu of stages customised to suit the employer that can include pilots to demonstrate training effectiveness. “Alongside all of this, we have to be good at balancing the income streams from employers and public funding,” says Hayhurst. “After all, we're operating as a commercial business.”

Through the care taken in its initial preparatory steps, which includes a great deal of information and guidance given to employers, the college aims to ensure employees are not placed on a course that has little relevance to the business or the individual. “I think this is why we have so much repeat business, because customers know that we're genuine and not out to give hasty solutions and then move on,” says Hayhurst. “We're sometimes asked for programmes leading to qualifications that could prove to be lucrative for the college, but if it's not appropriate for the employee, then we'll advise the employer of a more suitable alternative, regardless of income potential.”



Monitoring operations

As part of training delivery, management information systems are used to track the involvement of individual college staff with clients, and regular one-to-one meetings with line managers are arranged for caseload analysis and review. For their part, key-account managers prepare monthly reports on the progress of training of employees that are fed back to the client.

The college is currently preparing a 'return on investment' tool, which will be used as a prelude to the organisational needs analysis (ONA) it already conducts with clients. This will enable the impact of training to be measured more accurately. It will help clients achieve a better understanding of their training objectives and the key performance indicators, and more effectively monitor progress towards intended outcomes, such as an increase in productivity.

"This tool will enable the employer to make the measurement and for it to determine what should be invested in training," says Hayhurst. "We'll take measurements before, during and after to give a continuous picture of progress. It will mean all staff involved in ONAs will need to become proficient in the use of the tool – and it's likely to involve us turning to an external business provider in the next six months, which can offer return-on-investment training and provide a matrix template for recording data. Once it's in place, the tool will be another important USP for the college."

Wish-list for future development

Should funds be available, April Hayhurst considers the college would benefit from a larger spend on corporate branding and public relations so the image of Corporate College becomes more widely recognised in the business sector.

She also believes staff at the college would benefit from an enhanced business focus, as many have suddenly been projected into a competitive business arena. "The key driver for teaching staff is their duty to ensure that students have a good learning experience, whereas there is a contrary requirement by clients for a good return on their training investment. Staff need to understand this."

Changes to central funding arrangements could make programmes more effective, Hayhurst also believes. "Our funding arrangements can often dictate that we deliver in a certain way, which may not always be best for businesses." She highlights Train to Gain funding as an example. This requires 20 hours of guided learning – face to face – and this can be a stumbling block. For a medium-sized production company, 20 hours out of an employee's time is a significant commitment, no staff replacement costs are offered, and it is therefore inappropriate to pursue such a funding path with the employer.

"Many smaller companies don't have the resources to train under these schemes and so we have to be innovative in the solutions we offer. We had a client event at college recently and over 80 employers attended, so demand is there. I believe this is because we have good relationships, are client-focused, client-led and concerned about the needs of employers – and are not necessarily trying to fit their needs into the latest funding initiative."

Key features of Derby College

Derby College was formed in March 2002 by the merger of three colleges – Wilmorton, Mackworth and Broomfield – all located close to the centre of Derby. It has approximately 45,000 students of whom 8,000 are full-time. Recently the college reorganised into two areas: 14-19 year-old provision and 19-plus provision, with the latter targeted to grow by 500% over the next three years to meet the recommendations of the Leitch review.

Corporate College, sited in Mackworth, has been established for 13 years. It specialises in helping organisations gain competitive advantage through bespoke training, working for companies such as Argos, Rolls-Royce, Matalan and Wyevale. It is the only provider in the east midlands to hold the Training Quality Standard. Corporate College represents about a quarter of all of Derby College's activities.

Hadlow College in Kent was established in the 1960s as an agricultural and horticultural college. Since then, its education provision has grown considerably and the college now offers a wide portfolio of training and courses for the rural sector. Over the past five years there has been a transformation in the college's employer engagement strategy.

Employer engagement underpins turnaround

Five years ago, the college was struggling: its financial situation was serious and certification for some of Hadlow's NVQ courses had been suspended. Since then, its performance has been turned around, following the appointment of key individuals and strong leadership by the management team. Learners started achieving better results, and being a local college, its reputation started to improve in the area. The change programme was all "done from within", according to Sally Flanagan, business and workforce development manager.

There has been strong support from the top for the change the college has undergone. This has helped operational management to implement changes and gain support from staff for new ways of working. There has also been a firm long-term vision for the future. The college is now in a period of rapid growth, its annual turnover having doubled in size in five years to reach £11m while the strategy has remained the same – quality education and robust delivery. There is now a waiting list to enrol on many of Hadlow's courses and the main challenge is meeting the demand from local industry.

The key element in the college's transformation has been streamlining and strengthening its employer-facing work, so improving its reputation in the sector. Setting up a centralised unit – the Hadlow Business and Community Development Unit (BCDU) – to manage every aspect of the college's relationships with clients with a business focus has been pivotal.

Setting up an autonomous employer engagement unit

Five years ago, Hadlow College's senior management team recognised the need to set up a work-based learning unit with its own team of assessors and administrators. This unit was charged with responsibility for handling all arrangements with employers for NVQs, Train to Gain and apprenticeships.

A year later, in 2004, the BCDU was established in order to develop and deliver short courses for local employers. These range in rural subjects from tractor driving to City and Guilds qualifications in organic gardening, and in length from a one-day course to sessions held one afternoon a week for 11 weeks.

In spring 2007, it was decided to further streamline the college's employer engagement strategy and merge these two units. They have since been brought together under the brand 'Hadlow Corporate'. Now, the over-arching BCDU employs 18 staff, many of them in part-time roles. In the view of Sally Flanagan, combining the two employer-facing units in operational and branding terms made perfect sense: "No matter what activity the college is engaged with, we are providing a service to the sector, which is our primary client. Having responsibility for managing all employer relationships and delivery of courses and training at one point means we can be much more joined up."

Getting the staffing right

Getting the right team in place for work-based learning was crucial to the unit's success. All eight assessors bar one have been taken on since Flanagan was recruited five years ago with a remit to enhance the college's NVQ programme and other work-based provision. These skilled advisers have sole ownership of the college's employer relationships, managing every aspect of that relationship from start to finish. This includes initial discussions on training requirements, through to a training needs analysis and the design and teaching of programmes.

According to Sally Flanagan, one of the critical success factors is that the assessors all have considerable experience of working in industry themselves. For example, one assessor recruited by the college was a retired golf greenkeeper with a high standing in the profession, who had been chair of his trade body. In Flanagan's view, this firsthand experience gives BCDU's assessors immediate credibility in the eyes of employers and enables her team to talk to clients in the language of business. It also means that, through these skilled advisers, the college has in-depth insight into the commercial demands on a business and the need for flexibility in how the college delivers its programmes.

Allocating responsibility to assessors for specific client accounts means striking a balance between the individual's specialism and geographical area. While it is clearly beneficial for an assessor with industry experience in a specific area such as horticulture to work with clients from the same sector, the wide geographical spread of the college's activities means that location also has to be taken into account. While retaining and building their expertise in their specialism is important, taking on new areas of responsibility is also a good opportunity to widen an assessor's knowledge base. For example, the assessor with greenkeeping expertise has recently assumed responsibility for fencing in the college's horticulture portfolio.

As the overwhelming majority of training is delivered at employer premises, assessors spend much of their time out and about. They are provided with all the technological tools necessary to work remotely, including Hadlow-branded cars, mobile phones, lap tops and digital cameras. This ensures the promotion of a consistent corporate image of the college to its customers.

Building flexibility into the college's employer offering

Flexibility is a constant theme running through the college's design and delivery of its training provision. Recognising the need to minimise learners' time away from their work duties in the interests of productivity, there is no day-release system for courses. Instead, all training and assessment is carried out in the workplace, except for initial induction sessions. Appointments with learners are always cleared with the employer to ensure they are convenient. Even the initial interview process is streamlined, with learner interviews and discussions with the employer prior to the start of a programme all scheduled for the same day to save time and reduce disruption to work schedules.

Flexibility is also evident in the 'roll on/roll off' approach to course provision. This means there are no fixed term dates. Every course is therefore a rolling programme, with monthly start dates. Students can start a course in any month of the year and employers can enrol employees to begin studying at a time convenient to them.

Offering demand-led training to employers has implications for how a college the size of Hadlow manages its teaching and assessing resources. Sally Flanagan comments: "Inevitably there are peaks and troughs in business and it can be a balancing act. We manage caseloads very carefully and review these monthly. But we try and accommodate training requests as far as possible – and as quickly as possible – because if we are not responsive employers can go elsewhere."



Working collaboratively with employers

Hadlow College has worked with over 100 rural employers over the past five years, ranging from Defra and Eurotunnel to Chart Hills Golf Club Group. It has also developed a foundation degree in rural business management with Barclays Bank. In addition, Hadlow Corporate is part of the RBAT (Rural Business Advice and Training) network, a specialist group of providers supporting the development of rural businesses throughout the south east. The BCDU runs two European Social Fund projects, offering training to business in environmentally sustainable working practices and training to help women in part-time employment learn new skills.

As well as having responsibility for open courses and nationally recognised training awards and apprenticeships, the BCDU offers bespoke training to employers. For example, three years ago the college was approached by a local garden maintenance firm that wanted a tailored course designed for employees in basic gardening skills. The result was a three-day residential course in skills such as plant identification, pruning techniques and laying turf. The course content was designed in partnership with the employer, with a horticultural specialist working closely with the employer to identify training needs. The college also produced a training manual. The course is now run annually for the firm. Another bespoke course involved training a group of 20 local authority employees to become gardeners. Again, the college produced a training manual for the four-day course.

The BCDU assessors and administrators undertake all funding applications and paperwork on behalf of clients, so removing a considerable administrative burden from employers. Financially, the college operates on a full-cost recovery basis and breaks even on its NVQ provision. The more lucrative side of BCDU's activities is its short-course programme and any bespoke training it provides.

Hadlow sets a lot of store on building close working relationships with the 100-plus employers it delivers training to in the region. Their feedback on all aspects of the college's service is used to develop its future employer engagement strategy and course provision. The BCDU makes a conscious and concerted effort to keep its clients engaged, and views some as "really close allies", with a two-way relationship developing in many cases where one can ask the other for advice. The college has also nominated some employers for 'apprenticeship employer of the year' and for other award schemes where it feels special recognition is due.

Assessing the impact of Hadlow's employer engagement approach

Since its inception, Hadlow's new work-based learning operation has relied primarily on its positive reputation to generate interest from employers. "It has all been done from within," Sally Flanagan says. "As soon as learners started to achieve, there is a knock-on effect as we are operating in a specific sector in one geographical area, so word gets around. Since then, it has been like a virtuous circle as our results have helped boost our standing, which in turn encourages more approaches from employers." A measure of BCDU's success is the attempts by other employers, mainly from industry, to poach its assessors.

The college is understandably pleased with the way its fortunes have been turned around over the past five years, due largely to the streamlined unit that was set up to meet employer demand. "We needed a radical solution and it had to be forward thinking," Flanagan comments. "It is the quality staff we recruited in BCDU that have enabled the college to build the reputation of the 'new Hadlow', as well as the constant feedback we have encouraged from employers." In her view, having in place assessors with direct experience of working in industry has been pivotal in building that reputation. Establishing the new unit and enhancing the college's profile as a quality provider of land-based education in the region has been a step-by-step process, and one that has evolved over time.

The only aspect of the change process that could have been done differently, with hindsight, would have been to merge the two employer-facing units at an even earlier stage. Hadlow College's long-term aim is to become recognised by employers as the one-stop shop for training in the sector. In the shorter term, one key goal is to develop and provide more bespoke training for business.

The BCDU also has plans to introduce a more sophisticated client relationship management system so it can track every aspect of its dealings with employers. The current system is not very joined up and does not detail all the college's dealings with an employer. It is envisaged that the new system will link up every activity and contact that the college has with a client. The software upgrade will also link the employer database to the management information system for students.

Key features of Hadlow College

Most of the college's programmes are focused on land-based activities, ranging from animal care to floristry and from horse management to landscaping and grounds management. Over the past ten years, learning opportunities at Hadlow have become even more diverse and the college has added NVQs in retail operations and customer care to its prospectus.

Its mission is "to be an outstanding land-based college". The emphasis is on "practical experience in an outdoor classroom" – the college's Hadlow campus is situated in a 256-hectare estate comprising a range of habitats, farms, woodlands, plant collections, gardens, paddocks and pastures. Its other two sites are at Canterbury and Mottingham. As well as running a range of NVQs and short courses, Hadlow offers higher education awards in association with the University of Greenwich. Other awards include foundation degrees, national diplomas and national certificates.

There are 700 full-time FE students studying at Hadlow College, 500 HE students and 2,500 part-time learners. The college's activities are fairly evenly split in financial terms between further education, higher education and its commercial enterprises – such as a commercial farm, garden centre, bespoke non-funded training programmes and the hiring out of its facilities, venues and estates.

Effective customer relationship management processes are central to the success of **Newbury College** in engaging with employers.

This case study looks at how Newbury College engages with businesses, illustrated by its work with a luxury travel operator – Roxton Bailey Robinson – to fulfil the training needs of its 50 staff.

How Newbury engages with business

Newbury College has a small dedicated team responsible for meeting the needs of business customers. The business development team currently has the equivalent of two full-time staff and some administrative support. The team manages most of the college's relations with around 500 companies who are regular users of the college's services. The remainder are supported by college section managers who also act as account managers for key companies in their specialist areas.

The client businesses are of varied sizes and operate across a wide range of sectors. While some of the training is bespoke, many employers' needs can be met through public programmes run by the college. In total the business unit contributes about £250,000 of the colleges' annual turnover of £9m. The college is looking to grow this side of its activities in the future.

The business unit operates a flexible process-led approach to its customers. This means clearly established procedures are followed, covering everything from the initial contact with the business through to the training needs analysis (TNA) and even to the post-provision review. Bill Orson – one of two business development executives – emphasises the importance of these procedures to make sure the specific needs of each company are established from the outset, making best use of time and money. They also

make it possible for the tightly staffed unit to work effectively with a large number of organisations. The business team maintains a customer relationship management (CRM) system, giving it swift access to comprehensive information about a company's background and past involvement with the college. The entire process, from initial phone contact through to fulfilment of any contract, is recorded on the college's CRM system. This provides linkage between all stages of the process and enables a significant degree of in-house control even when work is contracted out.

Bill Orson says: "We try to be a one-stop shop, as far as we can, for businesses." He attributes part of the college's current success to being able to provide this, whether businesses need off-the-shelf training or a bespoke package. The college also uses available public funding support for training to attract businesses. The college's expertise in knowing what funding is available – for example through Train to Gain – and how to access it effectively is a competitive advantage the college uses to market itself.

The college attracts business customers through clear promotion on its website but mostly by local recommendations. The business team also promotes the college's services through business networking and the college has a lot of repeat business. This has become increasingly self-sustaining over time, as some of those who were trained at Newbury in the past – mainly doing apprenticeships – have moved up to management positions and are now interested in using the college to train their own staff. The professionalism of the business team – formalised in an employer charter (*see p22*) setting



out standards for the responsiveness and customer service that business customers can expect – is a source of pride for the team and college.

The college itself has three distinct areas of business activity – engineering and technology; business and finance; and health and care – in addition to its regular provision for 16-18s and adult and community learning. The business team actively engages section heads and other senior teaching staff at the college, offering them some basic sales training. This is so teaching staff can help with visits to prospective clients if their specialist knowledge is required to complete a TNA. Regular meetings with heads of department within the college also help to ensure the business unit is up to date with what the wider college is doing and vice-versa.

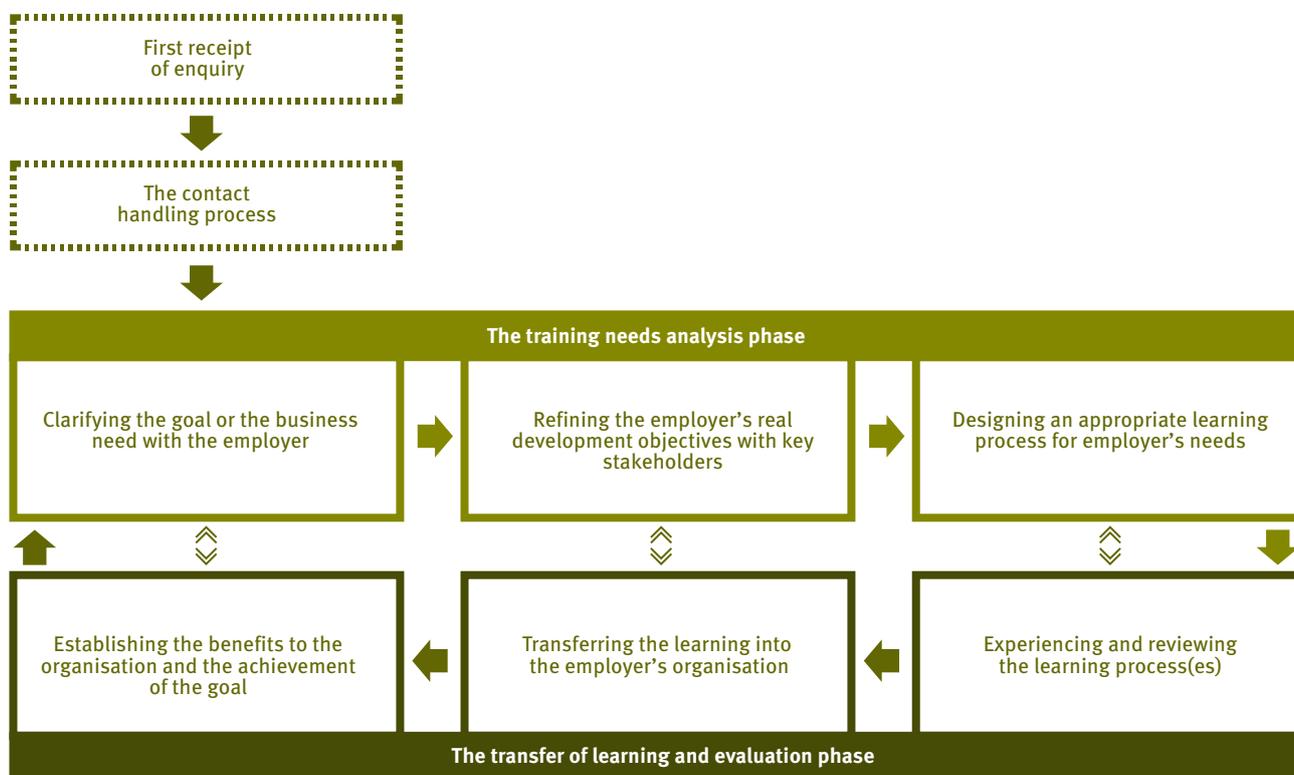
Responding to employer need

The local reputation of the college means that many businesses approach Newbury College of their own accord to see if it can provide the training needed. These enquiries are handled by a member of the business development team. Where appropriate, an initial telephone conversation is followed up with a visit to the employer to establish the needs of the company. Normally this is done through a TNA, which will also take account of the best timing and location for teaching. Once this process is finished, the business team will propose a programme of training, with a cost breakdown.

A major part of Newbury College's business provision is bespoke training packages, the majority of which cover a range of non-accredited workplace skills. Some of the most commonly requested include communications training, time management and leadership as well as specific technical skills training. Other programmes help employers fulfil statutory or regulatory requirements. For delivery of bespoke programmes, the college normally draws on a pool of external freelance trainers. Bill Orson himself undertakes a limited amount of delivery when time allows. Some college staff who teach part-time and therefore have some spare capacity are also involved on an ad-hoc basis in delivering training for business customers. Most full-time lecturers, though, do not have enough timetable capacity to lead customised programmes that often last several days at a time of the client's choosing.

Progress of the training programmes is monitored by the college. Reviews and evaluations are written into the entire process via the 'employer journey and learning process', illustrated in **Exhibit 18** – also a good example of the process-based approach favoured by Newbury College. Bill Orson explains: "We wanted a simple process that helped everyone." There is ground-level evaluation of programmes by learners themselves, and the business team at Newbury ensures all businesses who use their services receive follow-up visits to assess the quality of the courses and the impact they have had. This post-service analysis of the effectiveness of the programme is also useful from a marketing point of view, enabling the college to highlight tangible successes and ensure that objectives for the training intervention have been fulfilled.

Exhibit 18: The Newbury College employer journey and the learning process



Key factors in success

The college identifies a number of factors which have made Newbury College successful in engaging with businesses in the workforce development field. The first was the full support of senior managers within the college and a positive system of engaging with all staff to ensure they knew how the business unit operated, what its aims were and involving them in the training process where possible. A separation of function was also vital as a business unit needs to operate in a way fundamentally different to the rest of the college, dealing with customers and their needs rather than building a relationship with the individual learner. “We have not had one complaint about any piece of bespoke work that has been delivered by this college in the last three years ... that is down to the quality of the people and processes we operate,” observes Bill Orson.

The other main factor in making the Newbury College system operate successfully – with a lot of local competition from other training providers and only two full-time staff – was the early establishment of procedures and processes, enabling the relationship between the college and a business to be followed and tracked. Bill Orson also highlights the importance of a final review meeting following the delivery of a programme to ensure the needs of the company have been met. This could provide useful feedback to continuously improve the programme and help maintain the relationship and generate future business.

Key features of Newbury College

The college opened in 1948 and moved to its current site in 2002, less than a mile from Newbury town centre. In 2006 the college was awarded ‘Action for Business College’ status in recognition of its work with the business community. The college offers a range of courses and qualifications from Skills for Life and professional courses to apprenticeships, NVQs and a foundation degree programme which it operates in co-operation with Reading University. Newbury also holds a CoVE for management and finance training and was one of the first colleges to be awarded the Training Quality Standard in 2007.

The college is relatively small, with around 800 full-time learners and a further 7,000 part-time and evening course learners. The Newbury area is highly competitive in terms of further education provision – the total population in the catchment area is only about 150,000 people.

Tailoring programmes for Roxton Bailey Robinson

Roxton Bailey Robinson (RBR) is a specialist tour operator catering for the upper end of the market. The current business revolves around two brands: Roxtons, which offers field sports (shooting and fishing) around the world, and Bailey Robinson, which handles the tailor-made luxury travel business. Both are managed by a central team, including the finance, IT, HR and training provision. The history of the company goes back to the 1970s, but in its present form it dates from 1993, when four companies sharing a very similar client base combined to become a more major force at the high end of the travel market.

Much of the business is conducted over the phone and internet rather than face-to-face, with a high proportion of repeat business from existing customers. This made a move out of London a natural choice and the company relocated to Hungerford in 1994. The business has grown steadily since then and now employs 50 people.

Importance of a tailored approach

The majority of employees are consultants who must be experts in the packages and holidays on offer. This requires a good deal of travel to destinations so they can advise on the basis of firsthand experience. Tailoring of travel plans is central to the customer care process for clients. This makes for a very niche sales approach and the company believes a similarly tailored approach is best suited to meeting its training needs, rather than off-the-shelf programmes. The importance of understanding how the business operates and the nature of the clientele who are the focus of the business was one of the key requirements of RBR when it came to picking a training provider.

The relationship between Newbury and RBR grew out of personal knowledge. Lynsey Masilamani – group HR manager responsible for training – had previously worked for the college for a time. She was so impressed by what she saw of its activities that she resolved “If ever I was in a position to need training, I’m going to the college first.” Accordingly, knowing how the college operated and the professionalism of its approach, she got in touch with the business team in 2006 to see if the needs of RBR could be met.

RBR carries out its own training needs analysis. Essentially, the needs are identified during the course of the staff annual appraisal process. As part of this, line managers and staff agree what areas of their work could benefit from additional training. The recommendations for all staff are collated, and in many cases, similar needs emerge that can be met by training a group of employees. On occasion, programmes are needed for individuals, and these have also been made available. The majority of these are also run through Newbury College.

Designing the programmes

Since 2006, RBR has annually used a range of training services provided through nearby Newbury College. The working relationship with the college now follows a set routine:

- In March each year there is a meeting between Bill Orson of Newbury College and Lynsey Masilamani to review the training needs identified through the appraisal process
- While some of the training requirements will be the same as the year before for those staff who have not been through them, others need adapting or are totally new
- There is a discussion to identify what outcomes RBR wants
- The college then prepares a training programme to achieve those outcomes, with cost breakdowns and a delivery schedule
- When this is agreed, Bill Orson begins coordinating the trainers to deliver the training. Over the last year six consultants delivered courses based on their different specialisms, including sales, marketing, communications, business writing and leadership.

Much of the training takes the form of unaccredited, short courses. For example, bespoke courses have been run covering areas like English for business, time management, touch typing and, most recently, public speaking. A few of the courses are run on an annual basis – useful refreshers for existing staff as well as sharpening the skills of new starters. Others are one-off courses for either the entire firm, a particular group within it or on occasion just one person. In June 2004, the college worked with virtually all employees, starting with the board, to establish a coordinated approach to improving company communications, covering both systems and skills.

Benefits of working with the college

Lynsey Masilamani has chosen to continue using Newbury College for a number of reasons. Most important was Newbury’s willingness to construct bespoke courses and deliver them at times and places to suit the firm: “They’ll build a course for you, they’ll find a trainer.” It has also been important for RBR that the teaching methods and structures were appropriate to the values and culture of the firm and not just a generic training package. According to Lynsey Masilamani, Newbury College offers training at the same standard as a commercial supplier but offers far better value and support.

For RBR, training and development is a vital ingredient of its ethos. It is seen as not only enabling staff to do their current jobs well, but also helping them to progress in their careers. Masilamani in particular identifies the investment that the firm is willing to make in newly promoted staff to ensure they have the additional management and personnel skills which may not have been required in previous roles. There is a wider attitude that should training be requested and justified, RBR will undertake to provide it whenever feasible and Newbury College is the first port of call.

RBR has been very happy with the training provided by Newbury College. According to Lynsey Masilamani: “It is so reasonably priced compared to other training providers.” The quality of trainers and price are both major factors, but the feature identified by Masilamani as the deal maker was that Newbury College was willing to adapt training to fit the exact needs of RBR. The provision also had to be flexible and hassle-free, with effective processes of consultation and communication to ensure the company’s needs were met.

By pursuing a variety of approaches, ranging from operating a recruitment service to running sectoral forums, **Stoke on Trent College** has grown its employer-sponsored programmes into a major activity.



Structuring for responsiveness to employers

The college says all its activities and outputs are designed to support employers and a strong selling point for students is its links with employers. More specifically, it has a commercial arm – Training and Consultancy Services (TCS). This is headed by Andy Greenhough, director of enterprise and employer engagement, who spent 13 years at GEC as a commercial engineer responsible for contract management and business improvement. TCS has over 100 dedicated staff, but can also call on other staff throughout the college to provide employer-focused training. The unit focuses on obtaining new work and maintaining long-term relationships with employers, but does not micro-manage the training delivery process. The responsibility for this is owned by the training staff themselves. The TCS unit does, however, use a customer relationship management database to monitor activities and key account workers.

Almost all the training is delivered in the workplace by trainer assessors, who unlike the college’s lecturing staff, are employed on contracts requiring them to work at any time or any location. Lecturers mostly concentrate on teaching full-time students – 16-18 year-olds and those studying for foundation degrees – although a few are prepared to work flexibly and deliver whatever is required in the workplace. Trainer assessors’ flexibility means that they have, for example, delivered training for DHL night shift workers and their services are available seven days a week.

Many of TCS’s dedicated staff have worked in industry or commerce, and the trainer assessors tend to be employed straight from the workplace. “If they have skills and can deal with people, we can upskill them on the education and assessment front”, says Graham Moore, college principal and chief executive.

“Every intervention by Stoke College as a training provider is aimed at making the employer more profitable.”

A mix of services

TCS provides four core services geared to employers:

- **A recruitment service**, known as *Gateway to the workforce*. This helps match people who want to be apprentices with employers who want to recruit apprentices. It also matches the skills of people who want to change jobs, are unemployed or about to be made redundant with employers’ recruitment needs. In addition, the college intends to use this service to support Staffordshire University find jobs for its graduates. TCS interviews and tests candidates to help the employer make a selection, with over 650 vacancies filled in the last 12 months. The college has just secured £5.3m over three years from the Department of Work and Pensions and the European Social Fund to give skills training and job search training to disadvantaged groups, such as lone parents or ex-offenders
- **Full-cost training**, which comprises around 10% of TCS’s £12m budget. Employers pay the full cost of training – typically this will be to conform with legislation, such as health and safety
- **Adapting and updating the workforce**, which is a workforce development initiative delivering over 4,000 level 2 and some Level 3 NVQs as part of Train to Gain, with LSC mainstream funding and EU social funding. TCS carries out a training needs analysis, tests individual employees, and delivers training and assessment in participating workplaces. For example, the college runs training programmes in association with the trade union Unity to upskill the ceramic workforce to prevent redundancy or to ensure employees can make a step change into another industry.
- **Business innovation and support** offers consultancy on technology, business development, and business improvement techniques. As TCS staff undergo continuous professional development and are constantly in the workplace, they are well-positioned to support employers in these areas. For example, they often spend time with the supplier of new equipment and then train the workforce to use it.

“We must truly understand the employer and their business needs.”

Andy Greenhough says that every intervention by Stoke College as a training provider is aimed at making the employer more profitable, and every training contract specifies measurable workplace improvements that must be achieved as a result of the training. Progress towards these goals is normally monitored each month.

Building contacts with employers

TCS’s services provide a variety of ways for the college to contact and engage with employers – either individually or through employer networks – and many of the networks have been brought into being by the college. It also carries out direct marketing and uses brokers, both its own and the West Midlands Skills Brokerage (previously Business Link). But Andy Greenhough says his staff will redo any training needs analysis carried out by an external broker as “we must truly understand the employer and their business needs”. Along with four other colleges, the college has received funding of £1m to set up a brokerage infrastructure for the West Midlands. Enquiries can also come through the faculties or through the commercial team: “There is no wrong route.”

The college is currently working on engaging with employers in seven major sectors – tourism and leisure, business and professional services, engineering and manufacturing, construction, health and social care, logistics, and retail. These have been identified by the college as key economic activities for the locality.

The tourism and leisure sector was the first to be targeted, with the college helping to set up a 600-member employer network. The front-end of this is a website which mimics the main Staffordshire tourist website. The sector is familiar with the internet in general and that site in particular, as customers increasingly book accommodation and other services online.

Employers can use the website to ask the college to help fill vacancies from its pool of people waiting for apprenticeships in tourism and leisure – 16-18 year-olds coming to the end of their studies, unemployed adults looking for work and adults under the threat of redundancy or looking to change careers. They can also book training courses. Stoke College aims to respond within 24 hours to email enquiries via the website.

The college is also working with sector and sub-sector groups to identify their collective training needs, and more specifically, to establish what courses the sector would like the college to provide, and where and when they are required. In tourism and leisure, for example, there is a need for food hygiene and infection control training when employers are staffing up for the Christmas period. The college believes that once employers have identified the training they would like the college to provide, substantial numbers will put forward one or two candidates for that training, so making a programme viable.

An example of the way TCS is instigating and supporting a collective approach is that it has convened a group of black and ethnic minority restaurant employers. They have identified the need for common standards for their employees and training to meet those standards, which the college will provide. This way of working is efficient for the college, since setting up and communicating with a network removes the need to visit hundreds of small employers.

The role of NVQs

In general, Andy Greenhough says, employers are more interested in practical training needs and business improvements than in the formal process of employees obtaining NVQs. In addition to government targets, however, potential inward investors are very interested in the proportion of the local workforce with Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications. The college brings these different objectives together in two ways, while never ‘selling’ NVQs. Firstly, when an employer wants some bespoke training, the college can often reduce the cost to the employer by incorporating publicly-funded

NVQs. Secondly, the college puts forward the benefits of NVQs in terms of improved quality of work and consistency that employees who have reached a particular standard will achieve.

An active role in wider skills networks

Stoke on Trent College operates in partnership with other providers, enabling it to offer ‘joined-up’ services to employers. The consortiums and partnerships to which it belongs include:

- The North Staffordshire Train to Gain consortium, which the college leads, comprising 50% private and 50% public sector providers. It was the largest provider of Train to Gain in the West Midlands in 2007, with a £5m contract
- SURF (Staffordshire University Regional Federation), a consortium of the nine Staffordshire FE colleges, two Shropshire FE colleges and Staffordshire University, created in 2000 to develop a strategic partnership approach to the provision of higher education through FE colleges in this region. In the academic year 2004-05 SURF colleges enrolled nearly 700 full-time and 1,400 part-time HE students, most of them on vocational programmes (foundation degrees, HNDs, HNCs)
- A partnership with Staffordshire University to establish a new business centre as a one-stop shop for employers to help them identify their higher skill needs. Backed by HEFCE to the tune of £3m, it aims to develop packages for 3,000 employer-supported learners between 2008 and 2011.

Key features of Stoke on Trent College

The college serves an area where a quarter of the workforce have shortfalls in basic skills and half hold no recognised qualifications. The college has around 30,000 students – 75% of whom are adult – and 1,300 staff, offering training ranging from basic skills to foundation degrees. It has three CoVEs – in care, construction, and business and professional services. Stoke is currently seeking Training Quality Standard certification. Household-name clients include Vodafone, TK Maxx, Screwfix, Alton Towers, DHL and BT.

Many Stoke College students are already in the workplace. The college trains around 1,500 apprentices each year: 16-18 year-olds who have just left school, 19-24 year-olds in the workforce who are looking to improve their career options and, since 2006, some 100 apprentices aged 25 and over.



Believing there was potential demand among businesses for its services, **Telford College of Art and Technology (TCAT)** set about expanding its offerings and building up long-term relationships with local firms. Winning credibility and building up its client base, the college has now come to be regarded as an essential part of the local supply chain.

This case study features the college's programme of work with Ricoh UK Products Ltd, a subsidiary of Ricoh Company Limited of Japan.

Shaping the right offering

A decision was taken 17 years ago by the then recently appointed college principal (who has a background in engineering) to investigate what potential commercial customers for the college's services wanted. At that time TCAT had about 400 full-time students and was reliant on apprentices attending college on day-release programmes. The number of apprentice admissions was declining.

"It was obvious that the product range we had on offer was not something customers wanted to buy. And because of falling numbers, I decided that we had no long-term future if we carried on without changing," says principal Doug Boynton. "I head-hunted five staff with business-to-business skills and an entrepreneurial approach and took them completely off timetable so they could dedicate all their efforts to working with business. I told them to go out and find what businesses wanted – and then deliver it."

The changed approach requires detailed understanding of employers' training and development needs, with funding and curriculum flexibility to ensure appropriate responses to meet the needs. College staff have become expert at adapting to accommodate employers' requirements.

"Initially – as a college – we weren't recognised as having an offering that would suit the way business wanted to train within a company environment. They usually bought in specialists – spent a lot of money on them – and did in-house training that was very costly for

"They saw us as a dinosaur knocking on the door and questioned how in touch we were to carry out training for them. It was imperative that we had a team of people with business credibility."

them too," says vice principal Ann Griffiths who heads up the directorate. "They saw us as a dinosaur knocking on the door and questioned how in touch we were to carry out training for them. It was imperative that we had a team of people with business credibility to allay such concerns."

The operation has grown ever since. There are now 250 trainer and assessor members of the college's directorate of commercial development and training with roles dedicated to working with employers. The directorate has a current turnover of about £14m – a figure due to rise again next year. Train to Gain programmes make up the bulk of TCAT's funding stream and have contributed substantially to growth. In addition to the college's work with larger employers, this funding has encouraged SMEs to enter into training contracts with the college as the government subsidy makes it cost effective.



Organic growth through peer reference

To ensure it had the right offering, from the outset TCAT adopted a philosophy of not setting out to ‘sell’ courses or training, but to provide services to improve clients’ businesses. At first, evidence for this was not readily available. But as relationships between the college and its established clients grew, arrangements were often made – and continue to be made – for new clients to visit and gauge for themselves the impact of training by the college on other client businesses. This form of peer reference has contributed to growth, reinforced by the college’s reputation for working with larger companies that have local operations and now use the college as a training supplier nationally.

“This first began to happen over 12 years ago. The biggest growth area for us moving delivery outside of Shropshire was in food manufacturing,” says Boynton. “This was with the Northern Foods Group – we carry out their training across the whole organisation. Wherever they are, we are too. This has been fuelled by personnel and HR directors moving and taking us with them.”

As the college’s services spread further afield, companies talked to organisations in their supply chain to recommend the college, which helped it pick up additional business. “Once we prove our worth with companies, they’re willing to share their key performance indicators with us,” says Boynton. “This is something that would never happen in the early stage of a relationship as it’s commercially sensitive information. But we’ve built a good reputation and have even had senior company representatives speaking at national business conferences on TCAT’s behalf and explaining the impact of our training on performance.”

Learning from contacts

TCAT has a presence in all the Japanese companies that have operations in Telford and, Doug Boynton says, it has come to be regarded as ‘part of the fabric’ of many – one of the elements in their supply chains. The college responds flexibly to meet changing circumstances. If a product range changes for example, the company

“Working with business is mutually beneficial. Both parties have something to offer.”

will work with the college to ensure that the training programmes keep pace with the developments. Similar relationships exist with other non-Japanese owned companies, but he believes that the college has learnt a great deal – and benefited substantially – from working with Japanese firms.

“The work we’ve done with employers has made this a better college and business. I always stress this when making presentations to other providers,” says Boynton. “If you do a lot of work with many different organisations, it inevitably affects your own business processes. You see things that are absolutely marvellous, and you think: ‘I’m going to have a piece of that and use it as part of our strategic and business-planning cycle.’ Working with business is mutually beneficial. Both parties have something to offer.”

With up to 250 staff out with employers for the majority of their time, the college recognises the important role this plays in ensuring they are knowledgeable about business developments – for example, in food processing, robotics and healthcare. Staff learn firsthand about new technologies and processes that are being introduced and the implications these might have for a business. They also have an opportunity to evaluate if commercial developments could be applied or adapted for use within the college or to help teaching.

“Directorate staff are always up-to-date in the skills and techniques they need to teach and train in,” says Doug Boynton. “This free market intelligence and upskilling can be captured and has an effect on *what* we deliver to our campus-based students and *how* it’s delivered by campus-based staff. Our managers have access to live case studies from staff who work externally that can be used to enrich teaching by those whose job it is to deliver training at the college.”

Not only does intelligence from outside influence teaching and management processes, it is also having an impact on TCAT's rebuilding programme and the way new facilities are equipped. For example, state-of-the-art 'intelligent' buildings are planned, and revised IT strategies are being implemented to take account of the latest developments, providing savings in expenditure and space – all inspired by external contacts.

Structure of the directorate

The scale of the directorate's activities and the number of people involved has required a clearly defined management structure. Vice principal Ann Griffiths has four directors who report to her with responsibilities for:

- Sales (including a telesales team)
- Quality
- Operations
- Research, development and systems (including an administrative team of nine, one of whom is dedicated to identifying public funding sources).

In addition, a senior training manager (responsible for training directorate staff) also reports to her. Operations are divided into divisions covering the following areas:

- Meat and poultry
- Food and drink
- Sports and leisure
- Transport and logistics
- Engineering and construction
- Business and professional
- Management and care
- Apprentices.

Each division consists of a training manager, lead assessors, contract managers and training delivery staff.

Credibility and adaptability

The college reports that staff attrition rates are low. Most staff have high levels of commercial experience to ensure their credibility with employers. In view of the directorate's structure and the continuous expansion of operations, opportunities for career advancement for staff are good. An active programme of staff training and CPD is arranged to support the development and career enhancement of staff.

Commenting on employment of new staff and the essential role that research and development plays in the college's operations, Ann Griffiths says, "What we do is risky. We have targets for growth that mean we have to take on new staff to fulfil them. If we miss the targets, their jobs are at risk. I have to know when I employ people that there's business out there to justify the appointments – people's livelihoods depend on it."

"The LSC could pull the plug on Train to Gain tomorrow, or there could be a new government – things always change. We've been through change many times before, but because our research and development function helps us see what's over the horizon, we have a chance to alter tack, adapt what we're doing and go for other opportunities. That's why we have someone who searches constantly

"The growth and demand is out there in business."

for untapped pots of money that we may not have spotted before, so as one dries up, there's another one available. In this way, we're always able to grow the business in response to demand."

Advice for other colleges

Doug Boynton has advice for other FE colleges: "I believe there's a decision to be made now by general further education colleges. Do you want to remain a college just for full-time 16-19 year-old students, or a college that serves your business community? The choice is as stark as that – because of the way funding is going. If colleges decide that they'll just have full-time students, they will be much smaller in future and will have insufficient funds to grow by much."

He went on to say, "However, the growth and demand is out there in business, and the one thing that further education has always been good at is responding to demands that are placed on it. Colleges that are not currently involved in commercial enterprises should put their toe in the water and grow from there. We've invested £23m in new buildings on the campus recently and have hardly had to borrow a bean. Working with business has enormous rewards, not just financial, but for the whole organisation of the college and everybody in it – including full-time students, campus-based staff and the local community in general."

Key features of TCAT

Telford College of Art and Technology is a general further education college with a turnover of £28m and 800 staff, making it one of the main employers in the town. Based in modern facilities on the edge of Telford, TCAT is the largest college of its type in Shropshire. It focuses on the development of vocational skills for business, offering few purely academic courses.

Each year the college accepts in excess of 17,000 students, over 10,000 of whom are taught on employers' premises. Up to 50% of college turnover is generated from commercial development and training activities.

The college is one of a small number nationally to be graded as 'outstanding' in all categories by Ofsted. It holds beacon status from the QIA and was awarded the Queen's anniversary prize in 2007 for its pioneering work in delivering economically important skills in the workplace over a sustained period.

Ricoh has high expectations

Ricoh UK Products Ltd has a substantial office automation manufacturing operation close to TCAT in Telford. It began working with the college soon after the company set up in the town in 1986. Two types of digital photocopiers, toners, organic photo-conductor drums and injection-moulded plastic parts are manufactured at the site. The company also re-manufactures and updates complete machines for use in the third world and refurbishes photocopier control units for reuse in European markets.

The emphasis of the business is on high-tech, low-volume products (eg machines for print shops and local government), just-in-time supplies and quick turnaround of orders. It produces up to 170 machines each day. The site operates on a 24/7 basis, closing down only for one week of the year at Christmas.

“We need to maintain, somewhere locally, the foundations of knowledge and the structures that are needed to go with it.”

Ricoh employs about 800 people at the Telford site. Half the workforce is involved in production and the other half in supply chain management, dispatch, warehousing, distribution and logistics (from a subsidiary in Wellingborough), sales and administrative support functions (eg HR, IT, and finance). The company has a policy of no redundancies and seeks to develop its own workforce for roles of increased responsibility. Over 85% of employees have been on training programmes and achieved awards through TCAT.

Growth of college links

From the mid-1980s, Ricoh sent students on day-release to TCAT as part of an apprenticeship scheme, which eventually led to college staff training and assessing them on-site at Ricoh. The company also played a part in the development of, and had its apprentices take part in, an engineering systems technician programme at the college designed to develop multi-skilling. During delivery of the programme, college courses were developed with Ricoh that met other production and management development needs of the company.

In 1992 TCAT formed its in-company team (the directorate of commercial and development training). This developed the partnership with Ricoh still further by working across all areas of the business. A large office and training delivery room were allocated by the company for use by college staff which, five years later, were connected to the TCAT intranet as part of a ‘college in the company’ initiative.

Development strategy

About eight years ago, following a review of appraisal and personal development plans of all Ricoh staff, a new strategy was put in place to develop the skills and knowledge of the workforce. The company elected not to deliver training internally using its own staff, preferring instead to contract it all out. The one exception concerns introduction of new models, for which product-based training is provided by e-learning packages from Ricoh in Japan.

“We wanted standardisation in training, which meant establishing levels, partnerships, academies and cooperation between training suppliers. We’re always clear whenever we tender for business about the aims, objectives and timeframe of training, but we also need to maintain, somewhere locally, the foundations of knowledge and the structures that are needed to go with it,” says Dennis Williams, senior HR development officer. “We need to be able to duck into and out of existing knowledge. Ricoh processes are very easy. For example, continuous improvement – our tools and techniques are dead simple, but it’s no good at all if someone doesn’t know what the problems are, or what they’re looking at, or what to do when things don’t go according to the book.”

After working with a number of FE and HE institutions over the years – with varying degrees of success – Ricoh decided to work more fully with TCAT. This was in part because the college was prepared to make staff appointments that reflected the training needs of Ricoh and willing to make these in conjunction with the company.

Bringing operatives up to speed

“Originally, we arranged that we’d have three staff from TCAT on site at all times who would deliver the underpinning knowledge that we wanted for operatives, and also provide some practical training, such as welding and the use of small power and hand tools,” says Dennis Williams. “We had a target that all our people, once they started, would reach Level 1 or 2 in performing manufacturing operations/engineering within two years of registration and they would also need to have the underpinning knowledge in lean manufacturing and business improvement techniques, including 5S (tidy and healthy working techniques) and Kaizen.”

To ensure employees have time to undertake training, one and a half hours are built into the production schedules each week. Often it has been found that people do not need to come away from the workplace as TCATs assessors can operate alongside employees as they work, especially for Level 1 assessments.

The basic numeracy, literacy and IT skills of operatives (many of whom left school with modest or no qualifications, or have limited English language skills) were addressed by a four-year programme that ended in 2008. Those who needed this support attended the ‘college in the company’ room during their allocated training time to use the PC facilities linked to the TCAT intranet. The room was staffed by a member of the college staff on a full-time basis throughout the programme. To address outstanding needs of a relatively small number of employees, the facilities remain available for this purpose two days a week.

Developing team leader and senior operators

In 1991 the company put three bands of first-line managers through a process that reassigned to other roles those who were not judged to have met team leadership criteria. It consolidated the roles into one, renamed as ‘team leaders’.

“After that and in line with engineering practice at the time, we ran a structured ‘world class team leader’ (now NVQ Level 3 in management) programme for team leaders as a pilot, which gave them underpinning knowledge in, for example, presentation, communication and interviewing skills,” says Williams. “Before, we’d just assumed that they could manage these things and had the necessary skills. There were eight topics altogether and the programme concluded with a two-day team exercise off-site. Telford College managed the certification for this programme.”

Senior operators, who have no people management responsibilities, receive training designed to enhance, for example, their abilities to recognise and diagnose potential faults before they become critical. This enables them to take remedial actions to rectify faults without the need for involvement of maintenance staff.

Management certification by the college

Once the company had sorted out development needs on the operations side of the business, it reviewed the position of managers. There were concerns that an FE college would not have levels of current management knowledge appropriate to the company’s circumstances, so it decided to use a commercial specialist supplier.

“Ricoh is happier to be engaged with someone who we know and consider has a long-term future with us.”

“We’ve chosen to do all of our own skills development with another of our academy partners – external to the college and delivered off-site,” says Williams. “We looked at the new management standards in 2005/06 and found a suitable tool that covered 12 management competencies – the MAP Assessment (DPG plc). It also allowed us to measure 27 operational skills, such as finance and sales. Once we’ve identified where people have gaps, we give them development and they have to complete it in a certain period of time. Then we hand them over to TCAT for certification.”

The programme has been running for the last two years and has resulted in nationally recognised qualifications for managers, many of whom had no previous formal management qualifications.

“We had tenders in for the certification element of the programme from several FE colleges, including TCAT. At the end of the day,

Ricoh is happier to be engaged with someone who we know and consider has a long-term future with us, so we went with the college. However, we thought their management staff weren’t suitable, so they appointed two new management staff,” says Dennis Williams. “The project was also applicable to the Wellingborough site, so whatever we did on this site for certification had to be replicated there too – it meant even more business for TCAT.”

Reflections on the relationship with TCAT

“With hindsight, we would push for earlier engagement with a project manager. When we were looking initially at certain technically vocational areas, manufacturing was passed to engineering at the college, and warehousing went to transport and logistics. Now, we would insist that a business manager would handle all matters on our behalf,” says Williams. “We would also challenge the government more on its allocation of funding – we rode the wave by saying we’re going ahead with development programmes regardless of the financial implications. I believe we’ve been penalised for that.”

At the request of the Japanese headquarters, Ricoh has recognised the contribution TCAT is making to the business in its international company magazine. This is distributed globally and will detail the college’s work and relationship with the company. In addition, for the first time this year, representatives from the college are being invited to attend a formal event hosted by Ricoh that will recognise and honour all its favoured suppliers.

Examples of training programmes delivered at Ricoh by TCAT

- Electrical awareness and safety for the refurbishment line
- Basic mechanical training
- Electrical multi-skilling
- Welding
- Abrasive wheels
- Management skills based on Ricoh procedures
- Warehouse skills
- Specialist plant training (eg forklift truck handling)
- Basic and key skills
- Train the trainer, including assessor qualifications as part of management and team leader development
- Business administration
- Lean manufacturing and business improvement techniques
- Customer service
- Learning and development
- European computer driving licence
- IT user qualification (NVQ for use of IT in the workplace).

With a strategic focus on vocational training, West Cheshire College has greatly expanded its work with employers. Among its partners is Unilever – from a start of training a handful of apprentices from one local site, the college now runs a dedicated programme for apprentices from many of the company’s UK manufacturing sites.

To illustrate its work with employers, this case study focuses on a four-year engineering apprenticeship programme West Cheshire College has run for Unilever.

Role of the commercial services team

A commercial services team of 16 people, split equally between commercial advisers and apprentice co-ordinators, is responsible for the college’s day-to-day relationships with employers and the promotion of the training opportunities offered by the college. Members of the team act as account managers and are the single point of contact for enquiries from employers.

The team has in place a system that ensures approaches from employers are handled efficiently. “We have developed what we call ‘the employer journey’, which sets out how we handle an enquiry from the initial contact – for example a telephone call or a personal conversation – how it should be logged and assigned to a commercial adviser or apprentice coordinator, and the procedures for arranging and carrying out a meeting with an employer,” says Jayne Smith, area manager – commercial services. “We then determine the underlying reasons why training is needed and how it will impact the business. Is it for staff retention, to improve production, or because it’s a legislative requirement? We carry out a training needs analysis, and determine if an off-the-shelf programme could be used or adapted, or whether the development of a bespoke package is called for.”

Once contracts have been drawn up, training content determined, delivery staff identified and the programme is underway, members

of the team manage the account, making regular visits to employers to collect feedback and follow up any issues that may arise.

Three months after completion of the programme, the employer is revisited to see what impact the intervention has had and whether the initial objectives and business aims have been achieved. It is also an opportunity to discuss other possible future training needs.

“This is the way we try to close the loop with employers and, hopefully, start the process all over again with the next training programme – we aim to build long-term mutually beneficial partnerships.” says Smith.

Building funding packages

Funding for courses comes from various sources, including the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the European Social Fund (ESF). Employers requiring additional learning input are charged for the service, and wherever possible, provision is slotted into the existing college timetable to keep costs down.

The team has been especially successful in open competitive tendering for a number of different LSC, government, and ESF contracts. “Part of the skill of team members is their understanding of the funding options available, and ability to advise employers on costing options and benefits,” says Jayne Smith. “Also, their knowledge about combining packages means we don’t just offer one type of training; we’re aware of how underlying knowledge, for example, might be funded from a source so it reduces the overall costs for an employer. It’s a form of funding ‘pick-and-mix’ that we pull together.”



Cooperation with other providers

West Cheshire College is the lead college for Fusion – a regional partnership that focuses on increasing FE responsiveness to employers. Fusion comprises five college consortiums of 42 colleges and their partners, which jointly manage relationships with employers by sharing expertise and providing one-stop points of contact. It brings education and business closer together and fosters greater understanding, ensuring colleges are able to respond more effectively to employers' needs.

In addition, the college works in training partnerships with local authorities, the county council and commercial training providers. It also networks with a manufacturing CoVE based in the region.

“It’s important to cooperate with others, but we also have to look after our existing clients and understand each others’ needs,” says Smith, “Our relationships are built on trust and reputation – what starts as a small programme can often grow and grow with repeat business and new projects.”

Working with Unilever

More than seven years ago, the college trained a handful of apprentices who came from Port Sunlight, Unilever’s site in the Wirral. Due to the willingness of the college to adapt and respond flexibly to the company’s training needs, apprentices from the company’s Gloucester, Manchester and Leeds sites have joined those from local sites for the last five years.

“Unilever pays for accommodation for the apprentices from outside the area in order that they all go through a similar programme,” says Jayne Smith. “It’s a big commitment for the employer, so we have to ensure the teaching and residential arrangements are right – we want to make sure Unilever is satisfied with the service we provide.”

Unilever is responsible for selecting trainees for the four-year apprenticeship, but the college is willing to assist in initial selection processes. It has already provided screening of applicants for other employers that includes, for example, dexterity and basic skills tests plus observations of individual and teamworking. The process slims down applicant numbers from the many hundreds who apply, enabling the details of only suitable candidates to be passed to employers.

In the first year of the Unilever programme, apprentices – some of whom are only 16 years old – attend the college full-time in order to develop, for example, basic engineering skills and health and safety knowledge. To reinforce relationships with the company, they return to the company once every six weeks and carry out project work. As this is often the apprentices’ first time away from home, parents’ minds are put at rest with open days, tours of the college and visits to the residential accommodation.

In the subsequent three years Unilever apprentices have block release to attend the college, to accommodate the needs of the company and to minimise travel for apprentices from outside the area.

“It’s not been easy fitting block release into the college timetable and we’ve had to change staff expectations as we’re now teaching for 50 weeks each year instead of the traditional academic year,” says Smith. “It may be more difficult to manage, but that’s what our client wanted, so we tried it for one year. After that, Unilever came back to ask if we’d be willing to do it again if they could send even more apprentices – that’s how it’s grown.”



Winning over teaching staff

There has been a willingness by teaching staff to respond flexibly to the needs of business over the years. Many have undertaken placements to update their skills and knowledge – building their own relationships with employers. This has contributed to a better understanding of what employers require of the college. It has also led to an acknowledgement that accommodating the needs of one can often lead to other employers making similar arrangements – resulting in a growing intake for the college. Work-based assessors employed by the college who visit companies (including Unilever) regularly for NVQ assessment purposes have also helped staff keep abreast of developments in industry.

As well as staff making external visits, employers reciprocate the process. The college has an open-door policy, which means employers can come in at any time to see trainees – Unilever managers visit every Thursday. This approach has contributed to teaching staff getting to know clients so they understand, for example, why block release fits better into a company’s shift pattern, or what particular skills apprentices need for the workplace. “As staff have built their relationships and learned more about employers, the commercial services team has gained more support for flexible delivery,” says Smith.

Despite mutual understanding, the team finds it a challenge to balance teaching staff availability with the needs of employers. Whereas it is possible to predict with reasonable accuracy the student intake to public courses prior to the start of an academic year, employers are not always able to provide their numbers so readily. This disparity has the potential to cause over- or under-staffing by the college.

Benefit for SMEs

The commercial services team uses the college’s reputation for addressing the training needs of major national companies in promoting its services to SMEs. As a result of the experience gained from working with large employers, the college can offer broadly similar courses, putting trainees from SMEs on an equal

footing. The costs for this category of organisation – both financial and in lost employee working time – have a greater impact than for bigger firms. By offering ready-developed programmes that have been fine-tuned with large employers such as Unilever, the college reasons it can offer SMEs scope for their employees to develop new skills, helping them become more adaptable and productive workers.

Key features of West Cheshire College

The college is the largest provider of vocational learning in its area, with campuses in Ellesmere Port, Chester and Capenhurst. Each year it delivers learning to over 20,000 people at the campuses, workplaces and community venues. The college offers apprenticeships and an extensive range of full-time and part-time courses covering a wide range of subject areas. It also works closely with employers, helping them develop their staff. The college was one of the first 26 providers in the UK to achieve the Learning and Skills Council’s new standard for employer responsiveness.

Approximately 2,000 students undertake full-time courses and 20,000 students, (including approximately 400 apprentices) attend part-time courses. The college works in partnership with employers to fill skills gaps and plays an active part in the regeneration of the regional business community. It has committed over £70m to build two new campuses in Chester and Ellesmere Port, which will substantially improve FE provision in the region.

The college has taken a strategic decision to focus on providing vocational courses. These cover a broad range of sectors including engineering, construction, care, arts and the creative industries, business – including retail, sport and tourism – and catering. They lead to qualifications in the form of NVQs and BTECs.

Wherever possible, the college provides realistic working environments for training purposes – including for example a bistro, workshops and hairdressing salons. It also mixes students of different skills and levels in teaching groups to encourage mentoring and reflect external working conditions.

Unilever fosters an apprenticeship partnership

Unilever's origins date back to Victorian times when William Hesketh Lever began making Sunlight Soap at Port Sunlight. This led to the manufacture of other home care products by Lever Brothers Ltd. In 1930, the company merged with the Dutch firm Margarine Unie to create Unilever. Since then, the company has grown to become the global leader in many product categories, with an extensive portfolio of familiar food, home and personal care brands, such as Knorr, PG Tips, Lynx, Dove and Surf. It employs 170,000 people in over 100 countries, and in 2007 had a worldwide turnover of €40bn. Until recently, 'Unilever' had a lower profile than its brands, but now the company is establishing a stronger corporate identity.

Most Unilever factories in the UK have engineering apprenticeship schemes in place. With the increased emphasis on 'Unilever', the opportunity has been taken to align apprenticeships with one another, rather than being specific to a particular manufacturing site. Alignment benefits the company by providing apprentices with sufficient skills and knowledge to work at any of the company's manufacturing sites, while gaining national accreditation. It also helps instil a wider vision of the company, as trainees mix with their counterparts from elsewhere in Unilever.

Raising the apprenticeship bar

The company currently has about 50 engineering apprentices, the majority enrolled at West Cheshire College. On completion of a four-year programme, apprentices qualify with a Level 3 NVQ in engineering, a BTEC national certificate in engineering, and HNCs in electrical, mechanical or operations engineering. Commenting on the programme, Hazel Elderkin, project manager for engineering development says, "The company is raising the bar by putting the focus on Unilever, so it's made sense to raise standards for apprenticeships too through an intensive development plan aligned to nationally recognised qualifications and professional institute accreditation."

Apprenticeships come at a price – the company estimates that, even with government funding to the college, the real cost to the company over four years amounts to £80,000 to £100,000 for each apprentice trained. The college draws down maximum government funding for the Key Skills, NVQ and BTEC elements of the apprenticeships. However, the company pays tuition fees to the college for additional NVQ units, HNC modules and Unilever corporate programmes (eg a robotics course at £300 per student and pneumatics and mechatronics course at £1,000 per student).

Moving to block release

Consolidation of apprenticeship schemes has resulted in increasing numbers of Unilever trainees attending the college over the years. With greater numbers, the company has negotiated a block release arrangement with the college for apprentices from the second year onwards. Block release is more cost-effective for the company:

lower travel and subsistence expenses are incurred than is the case for day release – especially for apprentices travelling from Leeds, Gloucester or Manchester – and it provides more time back at the factories for in-house skills development.

"A college/company partnership approach meant that we had to understand the college's point of view – it's really important to realise what can, and cannot, be achieved. After all, you can't demand things when you only have one person on a course, but we also had to think what the consequence would be for the college in accommodating block release," says Hazel Elderkin.

"West Cheshire had to really look carefully at how they could deliver, and who could deliver, the course with our apprentices going in en masse for several weeks at a time. It's a big commitment for them as it means teaching staff are not available for other courses but, if it works out, the college could offer similar arrangements to other employers."

Meeting both shared and specific needs

Nine Unilever sites came together to discuss the alignment of apprenticeships into a Unilever UK framework, and now six factories send their apprentices to West Cheshire College. In the initial stages, when site representatives met to plan the apprenticeship programme, managers were wary about the different needs of apprentices as, for example, one plant makes ice cream, while another produces Marmite. Gradually they recognised that sites did have much in common with one another. "It was only when we started to map out the training requirements that people accepted that an engineer is an engineer no matter where they work," says Elderkin. "What makes the sites different are technologies and products." In recognition of the similarities and the differences between sites, an apprentice at the Leeds site for example, which manufactures personal care products using propellants, will learn about the basics of engineering at the college along with all the other apprentices, but in addition will specialise in aerosols when undertaking site- and technology-specific modules. Other sites have different needs, such as the technical requirements of machines within the hygienic environment of food factories.

"It was important that we acknowledged the existence of good training practices at the different sites and that it would be dangerous to throw the baby out with the bathwater by designing a completely new scheme," says Hazel Elderkin. "The Unilever UK team who designed the four-year development road map for the modular apprenticeship programme were engineers and technical trainers who collectively shared professional knowledge and expertise."

Involvement of site engineers means the company has been able to readily align in-house training to match the progression of apprentices through the college programme. For example, a module on pneumatics and electronics is arranged that is appropriate to apprentices in years three and four who are working towards an HNC.

Reviews of progress

Monitoring progress of apprentices is built into the four-year programme at three-monthly intervals. College tutorial staff routinely provide feedback to the company so that any problems are identified in a timely way, as are absences and illness.

Internally, the company has apprenticeship coordinators who report back centrally at quarterly UK meetings on the progress being made during placements and on the projects undertaken while on-site. In addition, a site volunteer mentor is assigned to each apprentice to provide guidance and support.

To help monitor their own progress, the apprentices are provided with individual copies of the four-year road map which sets out all the programme stages detailing the inputs, assignments, placements, projects, reviews, assessments and qualifications, so that they can take ownership and monitor their progress throughout the apprenticeship.

“We have a weekly rota of coordinators who take it in turns to visit the apprentices at the college – just to have a presence,” says Elderkin. “When we approached the college about what they wanted from us as an employer, they suggested more ‘visibility’ – particularly during the first full-time college year – to show that we care about the apprentices and that we haven’t forgotten about them for a year. The visits are a good opportunity for teaching staff or college coordinators to provide feedback on how things are going, and it’s a chance for us to talk informally with the apprentices to gather their thoughts on the course and their progress too.”

Each quarter, coordinators from the company sites and staff at the college meet to review the apprenticeship programme. It is an opportunity to consider, for example, any curriculum changes that might be necessary, changes in qualification requirements, curriculum developments at the college that may be of relevance, student progress, and alignment between academic and business elements of the programme.

The meetings are also an opportunity for collective decisions to be made. “It’s all about the college and Unilever working in partnership, measuring the success of the partnership, not getting complacent about our systems, and keeping each other up to date,” says Hazel Elderkin. “One of the latest things we’re planning for is the introduction of a foundation degree that apprentices can take as a next step. Progress is being made in mapping HNC units across and the current apprentices starting the third year will be able to take advantage of this development if they are willing and able.”

Content of the programme

Year 1: Introduction to engineering (based at the college)

- National Certificates (eg Mathematics for Technicians)
- Work towards a BTEC National Certificate (over two years)
- NVQ Level 2 Performing Engineering Operations
- Three key skills
- Site/technology-specific modules during visits to employer

Years 2 & 3: General engineering skills (block release at college)

- National Certificates (eg Communication for Technicians)
- Work towards a BTEC National Certificate in year 2
- NVQ Level 3 Engineering Systems
- HNC Electrical, mechanical, or operations engineering over two years from year 3
- Site/technology-specific modules
- Department/site placements

Year 4: Business skills (block release at college)

- HNC electrical, mechanical, or operations engineering
- Site/technology specific modules
- Department/site placements

Six strategic business themes run throughout the programme:

- Responsible care (eg safety, quality and environment)
- Operational effectiveness (eg plan and process control and engineering design)
- Win through people (eg teamworking and personal development)
- Innovation and capability development (eg robotics)
- Customer service (eg ordering and supply chains)
- Enabling systems (eg IT systems)

During the apprenticeship there are a series of modules undertaken in all four years that are generic to Unilever’s manufacturing sites and are delivered through a variety of methods, such as short courses, on-the-job and e-learning.



When First Group’s UK Bus Division decided it needed to help boost the skills of its bus staff, it found a suitable partner in **West Nottinghamshire College**. As the partnership has developed, it has played an important part in the expansion of the college’s involvement with employers.

This case study looks at how West Nottinghamshire College has developed its approach to employer engagement in recent years, illustrated by the work it has undertaken with FirstGroup, UK Bus Division. “Employer engagement is hugely important to us”, says Graham Howe, the college’s employer engagement director. “The number of 16-18 year-olds doesn’t change much from year to year, but there is no limit to the work we can do for employers.”

A focus on the employer as client

Graham Howe says that West Notts College has worked successfully with employers for the last ten years, but that the nature of the relationship needed to change to focus on the employer rather than the learner. In 2006 the college’s employer engagement initiative, which had been called ‘Learn at work’, was renamed the ‘Sherwood Partnership’. This denoted a change of approach, with the emphasis on making a difference to employers through a measurable return on investment rather than ‘training for training’s sake’.

The Sherwood Partnership now has a dedicated staff of 30, who secure and negotiate the contracts with employers. Curriculum staff deliver the training, while the Sherwood Partnership staff ensure the training meets the employer’s requirements and college standards. The college wants to build a relationship with employers over time and rejects the approach of many Train to Gain providers, who it says obtain their work through telemarketing. Most of the college’s customers come to West Notts through a combination of referral and recommendation, though it does target large employers through high-level networking.

Working with FirstGroup, UK Bus Division

First UK Bus is West Notts College’s largest national client, although the college has another three or four large national customers and many hundreds of smaller ones. “Our work with First UK Bus attracts other customers”, the college says. Its approach with First UK Bus follows the same model as all its work with employers: “We don’t just offer training, we make an in-depth analysis of your business, assess your strengths and weaknesses and tailor a programme to suit your needs.”

The college believes employers know their own businesses so it works in partnership with them to improve the quality of the training they deliver. First UK Bus was already training its staff, with funding support from the Learning and Skills Council, but sought the college’s help in integrating literacy and numeracy and ESOL skills into its NVQ training programme. It also wanted every employee to have an individual learning plan. The company has allocated some of its LSC funding to the college in return for college support of the training development and delivery process.

“The number of 16-18 year-olds doesn’t change much from year to year, but there is no limit to the work we can do for employers.”



The college is also now responsible for assessing and training First UK Bus Division's union learning reps, so they will be in a position to encourage and advise their members to improve their basic skills and obtain NVQs. This training can be anything between a year-long full-time course to a few hours of part-time study, depending on the learner reps' existing skills. The college takes an active part in communicating the First UK Bus training offer to employees, holding and attending open meetings and visiting bus depots to do this. It comments that the employer identifies the characteristics of individual depots and that the college must tailor its approach to take account of these.

The benefits of employer engagement

"Working with employers helps us to understand business better, which enables us to work more effectively with other employers", says Graham Howe. "It also helps us to change our own internal culture, so that staff understand and focus more on employer needs." The college is pleased that employer representatives have become involved in college governance and sponsorship – sponsoring and equipping rooms for apprentices, for example.

West Notts commissions independent evaluations of its work with employers. These have identified improved bottom lines and happier, more motivated staff as a result of programmes.

When talking to West Notts Ofsted inspectors, some employers including First UK Bus have questioned the amount of paperwork involved in working with an FE college. West Notts College understands the problem but says there has to be an audit trail when public funding is involved. The alternative would be to charge employers £1,000 to £2,000 per trainee.

"Don't do employer engagement unless you are absolutely committed to it", Graham Howe says. "Don't dabble and fail, as it will hurt employers' views of the FE sector as a whole. But if you do succeed, the value of work with employers can be high" – some £20m a year in the case West Notts College. And there is huge potential for more of this work, the college believes.

Key features of West Nottinghamshire College

The college has around 20,000 students, most of whom study on a part-time basis, and about a thousand staff. It was formed in the 1970s out of an arts college and a technology college dating back to 1904.

Over half of its annual turnover of £41m comes from its work with employers. The college's funding for its work with employers mostly comes from two substantial contracts with the Learning and Skills Council: one to deliver work-based learning for apprentices and the other to deliver Train to Gain. The college has four CoVEs – in high performance engineering, logistics, construction, and health and social care – and has applied for the new Training Quality Standard.

FirstGroup, UK Bus Division's drive for skills

FirstGroup, UK Bus Division is the UK's largest bus operator, with 9,000 vehicles operating services in more than 40 towns and cities from Aberdeen to Penzance and from Clacton to Swansea. It also operates yellow school buses in the UK and the USA, and Greyhound buses in the USA. Some 20,000 of its 25,000 UK employees are bus drivers.

“The company as a whole has a long-standing commitment to lifelong learning.”

The company as a whole has a long-standing commitment to lifelong learning. It has worked with the National Employer Service and the Learning and Skills Council for some years to enable its drivers to achieve the Road Passenger Transport Level 2 NVQ. First UK Bus Division is made up of 18 operating companies, each of which decides for itself how to take advantage of training opportunities offered by the centre. Every company in the group, however, has NVQ 'productivity' targets (the proportion of NVQs expected to be achieved per group of employees).

This case study describes how West Nottinghamshire College helped First UK Bus Division to embed literacy, numeracy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) skills into Road Passenger Transport Level 2 NVQs for its bus drivers across the UK.

Training as a route to lower staff turnover

Until 2004, annual labour turnover among First UK Bus Division's drivers exceeded 30%, which meant some 6,500 drivers had to be recruited and trained each year. Previously, drivers received an initial induction and training and were then sent into service. They were “hailed back later” to do their NVQs. The company concluded this was not a good approach, as once someone had switched out of the training mindset, it was difficult to get them back into it.

The group has found from experience that an employee who stays for six months is likely to stay for a much longer time. In order to retain drivers during that critical early phase, it has since 2004 operated a programme lasting around six months for new recruits – two months for induction, driving training and passing the driving test, and four months for completion of the NVQ itself. Obtaining the NVQ seals the employee's first six months in the business. The new programme has had the effect of reducing labour turnover from 30% to 23%, generating a saving of some £700,000 for each 1% drop in staff turnover, amounting to nearly £5m a year.

Enhancing functional skills

More recently, First UK Bus became aware that the literacy and numeracy skills of its bus drivers were, in some cases, less than adequate to do the job as well as it could be done. And an appropriate command of the English language was an issue for the many drivers for whom it was not their first language. The company has recruited heavily from the EU accession states since 2004, with some 1,500 new employees arriving to date, principally from Poland and the Czech Republic. Most of these are bus drivers, engineers and cleaners, and their ESOL needs were outside NVQ provision.

First UK Bus recruits and trains drivers from accession states in their home countries. It provides a 60-hour training course in Poland (part-funded by the company and part-funded by job applicants) and appoints staff in Poland once they have successfully passed through this training. But there was a mismatch between the skills the new staff had on leaving Poland and the skills they would need to benefit from the training offered in the UK. The most significant of these was that the need for conversational English 'on the job' was rather more important than the focus in Poland on the ability to read and write English.

As it had a well-functioning machine for delivering NVQs, First UK Bus wanted to adapt this to deliver literacy, numeracy and ESOL training. But the organisation found that its existing training provision was somewhat of a straightjacket, preventing it from incorporating these other skills into its NVQs. So it looked around for help from other providers in the market.

Linking up with West Nottinghamshire College

First UK Bus had worked with other colleges on Skills for Life provision in the past, but it felt the time had come to find a new provider. In January 2007, First UK Bus recruited a new Skills for Life manager, who was taken on both for his Skills for Life expertise and his knowledge of the FE college network. He knew of West

“The new programme has had the effect of reducing labour turnover from 30% to 23%”

Nottinghamshire College which, through its Sherwood Partnership, offers businesses an in-depth analysis of their organisational strengths and weaknesses and a tailored programme to meet their needs. Another bus company also spoke well of its relationship with the college. The company therefore contacted the employee engagement director at West Nottinghamshire College in June 2007. Within three months the company and the college had signed a partnership contract specifying exactly what each party has agreed to do and when it would be done. The company then terminated its contracts with the previous providers.

The college's role is to embed literacy, numeracy and ESOL skills into First UK Bus NVQs, most of which are gained through observation of workers doing the job. It has done this by streamlining activities and getting the best processes in place. The college supports First UK Bus assessors and verifiers as they deliver training and assessment in the workplace (including on the bus). The college receives LSC funding when First UK Bus employees successfully achieve literacy, numeracy and ESOL qualifications. First UK Bus Division's investment is in the form of an NVQ contract manager and a Skills for Life contract manager at the centre, and a training manager in each of the 18 operating companies.

Rethinking approaches to training

When First UK Bus started talking to the college it was impressed by the suggestions the latter was able to make from its perspective, based on knowledge of learning and students, as distinct from First UK Bus' focus on the business. For example, college staff pointed out that many staff who appear to have numeracy issues, finding it difficult for example to fill in numerical forms, can often calculate odds in a betting shop or darts scores without hesitation. It was "a defining moment", First UK Bus says, when the college said that staff problems with forms were primarily lack of confidence rather than lack of skills, and suggested programmes which would identify the numerical skills employees already had. This gave employees the confidence to fill in the forms competently.

“The company has found the great majority of new employees are hungry to learn, but a few drivers with long service are resistant.”

Working towards NVQs is voluntary for staff of First UK Bus. The company has found the great majority of new employees "are hungry to learn", but a few drivers with long service are resistant. This may be because they are worried about exposing literacy and numeracy shortcomings, but whatever the reason, the company does not force them to go down the NVQ route. Many employees who achieve the NVQ, however, are proud to obtain their first qualification. Others have had the satisfaction of having their first attempts at writing published. The local Skills for Life tutor and the union learning rep ran a short story competition in one depot, publishing a booklet of the short stories produced. Impressed by the response, the company subsequently organised a new writing competition for all staff, and in 2008 published a company-wide anthology of short stories.

Developing Skills for Life delivery

West Notts College provides the Skills for Life support for First UK Bus Division's network of 44 learning centres – one in each depot – by working with the company's union learning representatives and managers. By December 2008 First UK Bus plans that all its employees will have access to a learning centre.

The learning centres were set up as a joint initiative by the group's management and the Transport and General Workers' Union (now the T&G section of Unite). A handful of centres were established in 2002, and the numbers expanded as the company has realised that they can be a key part of improving the business. Some centres worked very well, but some were "lazy assets", so the company decided that it needed expert help to make better use of them.

The learning centres are at different stages of development. Some are very proactive, with fully trained union learning reps, others provide training that is less obviously linked to the job, such as computer literacy or foreign language skills, on the principle that learning anything encourages people, in time, to undertake work-related training.

One of the main tasks of the learning centres is to encourage employees with basic skills needs to come forward for assessment and training. With support from the college, the company piloted an on-line assessment tool – Tribal Education's Target Skills: Initial Assessment – over four months in two operating companies and found that staff who used it found it non-threatening and interesting. It is now rolling out a customised version of the Target Skills Gold system throughout the country – 19 of the 44 learning centres now use this.

Designed for adults with basic skills needs, Target Skills Gold assesses those needs and provides an individual learning plan for each user. First UK Bus observes that there sometimes appears to be an inverse relationship between ability and use of technology – the less formal education someone has, the better they can be at using new technology. So the fact that Target Skills learning uses 'M-learning' – mobile phones, PDAs, pocket PCs and the internet – is a plus. A new skill is explained, with audio support for those with low levels of literacy, the learner tries out what they have learnt, and a short test confirms that the skill has been acquired. Tutors can support learners online and can track everything learners do, from the initial screening and assessment to learning materials and practice tests. Reports can also be generated for senior management.

Union learning reps play an important part in reassuring staff and encouraging them to use Target Skills. West Nottinghamshire College is running development programmes for them so they can help people use the system. The college is also driving increases in opportunities for people to access literacy, numeracy and ESOL training by helping the company equip those centres which are not yet fully set up.

“First UK Bus recently decided it would like the college to appoint a single account manager.”

Each of the company’s 18 operating companies decides for itself whether to introduce the Tribal assessment process. Once the managing director and his team have made such a decision, a steering group is set up consisting of representatives from the central learning and development team and the college plus a significant decision maker from the business. The steering group then brings together the NVQ team and the union learning representatives. The industrial relations aspect of this process can be challenging as the parties may not be used to working together. The college acts as an honest broker, and can sometimes be trusted by employees and union reps more than the company. About half the group’s operating companies now have a steering group in place.

College involvement overseas

The college has also helped to align the training offered to central European recruits in their own countries with the training and induction provided in the UK. The previous emphasis did not fit well with the training recruits progressed to on arrival in Britain, First UK Bus says. The approach to overseas recruits was to find the person who spoke the best English, communicate with him or her, and ask them to translate for the rest of the group. But First UK Bus has now rejected this approach. “People want to come to the UK to learn the language, so they are happy to work hard to acquire and improve English language skills. This is better for the company and better for the individuals”, comments Chris Jefferies, First UK Bus learning and development manager.

In order to move away from the old approach, representatives from the college and the company visited the overseas training operations to help the local trainers assess and adjust what they offered potential First UK Bus employees. As a result, the transition between what happens there and what happens in the UK is now seamless. Once here, overseas recruits now undergo induction and training alongside their UK colleagues, which helps develop their language skills. They are put through the Tribal basic skills and ESOL assessment process in the same way as UK recruits.

Relationship with the college

Chris Jefferies comments that he had no difficulty making initial contact with the college, and the company had confidence since it was acting on a recommendation from another public transport organisation. The number of college staff involved with support for

First UK Bus has now reached double figures. In order to simplify communication with these staff, First UK Bus recently decided it would like the college to appoint a single account manager. It was pleased when the college readily agreed and invited the company to take part in the recruitment process for the new post.

The college and the company have developed a supportive working relationship. For example, the college takes part in quarterly meetings of First UK Bus Division’s 18 NVQ scheme co-ordinators, one from each operating company, in order to review progress and sort out any problems. For its part, First UK Bus has been visited by Ofsted to observe a contract review meeting as part of the college’s regular inspection.

The college staff involved in the programme have proved flexible over where and when they work, a key factor for a business operating round-the-clock and with depots spread across the country. They have been happy to take part in a day of safety training provided by First UK Bus – a company requirement in view of the special nature of bus depots.

“Overall, the company says that the college has helped it achieve some of its learning and development objectives faster than would otherwise have been the case.”

Lessons of experience

Overall, the company says that the college has helped it achieve some of its learning and development objectives faster than would otherwise have been the case. It is pleased that, as a result of the relationship and the use of Tribal’s Target Skills Gold, it is the first organisation to be able to conduct national tests of numeracy and literacy outside a college environment. The company observes that it would like a robust review of the bureaucracy required in the type of relationship it has with the college, since it finds the amount of paperwork rather daunting.

In retrospect, First UK Bus Division would have liked to understand earlier the extent of what the college could do for it. It had a specific need which it focused on, but says it would be useful to have had an induction into all the services the college could offer, since the company’s knowledge of a college’s activities and environment is limited. With hindsight, it would also have liked to start the relationship sooner, but it did not appreciate its needs properly.



Understanding and accessing funding sources is just as essential to a college's successful operation as the delivery of courses and programmes. **West Suffolk College** has drawn on this expertise in its partnership with Marshall Aerospace, so the college now manages the funding and much of the administration of the company's apprenticeship schemes.

This case study shows how one of West Suffolk College's clients – Marshall Aerospace – has been able to outsource key elements of its apprenticeship scheme to the college. The move has enabled the company to retain overall control of its apprenticeship schemes but without the burdensome administrative aspects. The college also handles delivery of part of the training.

Developing employer engagement activity

West Suffolk College offers an extensive programme of learning, which for a long time has been aimed at local employers as the main customer. In all, the college has worked with over 600 employers and currently has 800 learners on apprenticeships, with many more on NVQ and other work-based learning programmes.

The college's publicly-funded training activity includes Train to Gain, for which the college has developed a consortium of nine Suffolk-based training providers to deliver NVQs at Level 2 on employers' premises. In 2006/07, the college entered a partnership with Suffolk County Council – the Suffolk Care Training Partnership – to deliver the Council's Care NVQs. The partnership delivered a total of 489 NVQs for the council and other organisations involved in care. The college has also run several European Social Fund projects. These have helped the college to build its capacity with employers, as the projects have often enabled it to extend work that the college was already doing with client organisations.

In the 2006/07 financial year, local employers purchased more than £550,000 of training services from the college to meet their workforce development needs, some 85% of which was delivered to the SME market.

This commercially-arranged training, managed through its 'Services to Business' (STB) arm, included:

- Health and safety training, such as manual handling and first aid
- Personal licence holder qualifications for the retail and hospitality industries
- Electrical, gas, oil and other regulation assessments
- Teacher training for other educational establishments and
- Bespoke management training for private and public sector organisations.

Martin Wagner, assistant principal responsible for business and student services, says that many years ago the college appreciated the need to diversify its learning provision by developing a strong employer engagement strategy. The college's STB arm was therefore set up in 1993 in recognition of the need to expand its income streams. This approach is now enshrined across the college's faculties and embedded within its strategic and operational planning processes.

While Martin Wagner has responsibility at a senior level for work-based learning activities, he is supported by a well-established business development unit. This has two roles: to secure new business in the region and seek external public funding for it, where appropriate. The small team of four does not therefore deliver any learning itself, but has strong links with all faculties in order to broker training delivery for clients. The unit is the single point of access for employers looking for training services from the college.

Securing buy-in across the college

The management structure is set up in a way that helps integrate the college's strategy and provision for work-based learning across the college. For example, the head of business development is part of the management team and participates in meetings involving heads of faculty on a regular basis. There is also an internal employer engagement strategy group. "This forum is critical to streamlining our employer offering and ensuring that the college works through any blocks and grasps new opportunities in our work-based learning provision," Martin Wagner comments. "The management structure and the way in which employer engagement is integral to our strategic planning process mean that there is buy-in and ownership from every part of the college."

It is this college-wide approach to work-based learning and employer engagement, in his view, that is West Suffolk College's strength in delivering this type of learning provision. The college has only been able to achieve such an integrated and mature approach because it has such a firm and long-standing tradition on which to build, Martin Wagner believes. Although it has been a very conscious decision to base so much of the college's activities on its employer engagement strategy, it is an approach that has developed organically, alongside the need to build the college's capacity in order to deal with the demand for its provision.

In order to ensure accountability and consistency for work-based learning provision, a head or assistant head of faculty acts as the strategic key account manager for every work-based learning contract. For example, Martin Wagner is the key account manager for Marshall Aerospace. All those responsible for company contracts and employer relationships have regular contact with employers, and are knowledgeable about the college's range of provision. Any college representative working with a client is expected, and will be able, to cross-sell the college's other programmes and training services.

West Suffolk College employs some 100 people in work-based roles – including assessors, trainers and lecturers. Many of these are based at employer premises much of the time. The college therefore holds an annual conference for this group in order to aid communication and promote sharing of experience. Effective internal communication is also supported by a sophisticated client relationship management (CRM) system that is constantly being refined and improved to ensure that it is meeting the college's needs.

Promoting West Suffolk College's reputation with employers

Working in partnership with local industry is the bedrock of West Suffolk College's ongoing course provision. The college actively engages with the sectors which it serves, and has formalised its links with employers by setting up an employer panel. Some 20 employers from the region sit on this forum. Originally established so that the college could benefit from advice on future curriculum needs, the panel meetings are now very much a two-way channel, with employers wanting to know what learning provision is available and seeking advice on work-based learning from college representatives.

There is an expectation that the college will respond very quickly to any external approach from an employer. According to Martin Wagner, as a rural college with a limited client base, it is essential that the organisation sells itself on quality and builds up long-term relationships with employers. Recommendations from existing clients help to develop new business. In addition, from time to time the college carries out telemarketing to set up new appointments with potential customers. Representatives from the business development unit then visit the organisations.

The college is keen for its dealings with employers to be transparent. It has recently developed an employer's charter (*see p22*) that sets out what employers can expect in terms of quality and standards from the college, and it also has an employer handbook that sets out detailed information on issues such as response times, and feedback and dialogue arrangements. Regular communication with its clients and potential clients is considered crucial, and the West Suffolk College regularly produces a business development newsletter to support this process.

Delivering tailored training to clients

A growing part of the college's learning provision involves developing bespoke training programmes for employers. Chris Woods, head of the Suffolk School of Management at the college, says that it is very important the learning provision meets the client's precise business needs, in relation both to content and timing of delivery. The college's bespoke programmes are therefore designed to minimise disruption to work schedules and usually take place on the employer's premises. Another noticeable trend in what companies now prefer is the delivery of training in bite-size chunks, again an approach that is flexible and can be scheduled to fit in with other, more pressing demands on the business. From the college's perspective of matching its own resources to demand for training, Chris Woods is the only permanently employed person in the management school but he has a pool of over 30 experienced professional consultants and trainers working for him on a contract basis.

One example of where West Suffolk College has provided this type of bespoke, full-cost training is a recent leadership programme devised for Suffolk County Council. The local authority had experienced considerable change, generating a need to expand the generic capability of its managers. The programme included the development and facilitation of action learning sets and the award of NVQ levels 3 and 5. In another example, at Maersk Shipping, the college has designed a bespoke customer service training programme that will ultimately be delivered to 700 employees in the company's customer service 'bank'. The course carries a customer service NVQ award. The programme has been designed to meet the company's specific business needs; for instance, the learning was delivered over a three- to four-month period, effectively fast-tracking the award of the NVQ.

Any work-based learning contract such as a bespoke programme is closely managed, so in effect there is a triangular relationship between the client, the faculty and the business development unit.

Assessing the impact of work-based learning

Martin Wagner is clear that any training delivered by the college has to make an impact on the client's business, whether it is a better skilled workforce at the end able to boost profit levels or enhanced service provision. "The difficulty is in isolating the impact of that training from other variables," Chris Woods comments. "Although we do our utmost to establish the results of any training, it is a very resource-intensive exercise. But increasingly we will all be judged on the impact of delivery and that is right and proper."

West Suffolk College undertakes a range of evaluation exercises to measure the effectiveness of its learning provision. Some of these are conducted at the learner level, so satisfaction sheets are completed at the beginning and end of any training delivery in order to assess the difference that the programme has made to them as individuals.

The second approach is at an organisational level. Having established at the outset of any programme what the employer's needs were, this type of assessment attempts to establish whether these needs were met. Evaluation of this kind is easier if the programme in question was a closed one, involving just one organisation. The college also undertakes an annual employer survey to assess the success in meeting its work-based learning objectives. Questions to clients include whether that employer would use the college again for training, whether the training has made a difference, and whether the employer would recommend the college to another organisation.

In Martin Wagner's view, there are a number of critical success factors involved in effectively implementing an employer engagement strategy. The key one is understanding that the employer is the primary client, and so gearing the college's services and operations on this basis: for example, some time ago its student database was changed so that the CRM system now has employers as the key point of contact. "The internal structure has to be right and the policies and procedures have to be in place so that the same approach is implemented college-wide," Martin Wagner comments. "It is also vital that the college keeps reviewing and adjusting its strategy in a continuous improvement way."

Key features of West Suffolk College

The college dates back to 1951. In 2006, it was ranked as 'outstanding' in each of the five Ofsted categories, an achievement that resulted in the college being awarded 'Beacon' status. The college holds CoVEs in construction and engineering.

With an annual turnover of £23 million, the college has over 18,000 students, almost two-thirds of whom are aged 25 and over. It employs 1,050 employees, of whom two thirds are teaching staff and the other third are support staff. In 2007, the organisation won a place in the Sunday Times' *100 Best Companies to Work For* awards. The college's main campus is in Bury St Edmunds.

Marshall Aerospace outsources elements of its apprenticeship programme

Marshall Aerospace was established in 1909 and remains a family owned company today. It is one of the Marshall Group's four businesses and employs 2,000 employees. The company makes a significant investment in ensuring it has a workforce that is skilled and qualified to a high standard. Training and development is therefore a high priority. Marshall Aerospace has its own on-site training centre that has been rated as "excellent" following two inspections by the Adult Learning Inspectorate. The training centre has also received ISO 9002 accreditation and Investors in People awards.

The company has been taking on apprentices ever since the 1920s. It typically takes on around 20 new apprentices annually and currently has 115 apprentices either on a three- to four-year craft apprenticeship (such as a mechanical manufacturing engineer) or a four-year technical apprenticeship (such as a technical engineer in electrical/avionics design). An apprenticeship is made up of a variety of elements:

- A period of six months in the training school
- NVQ Level 3
- A technical certificate and
- Key Skills in five areas.

Marshall Aerospace has worked with SEMTA (the Sector Skills Council for science, engineering and manufacturing technologies) to develop qualifications for the sector. The company's apprenticeship schemes are accredited by SEMTA. The company has its own team of mainly part-time assessors and one internal verifier to deliver the apprenticeship programme. It is important to the company that it has its own assessors to maintain the high standards and control over its apprenticeship schemes. The company also runs an adult retraining programme.

Growing burden of administration

Marshall Aerospace has been involved in government-funded training since the early 1980s. It was, until recently, a national employment service training provider receiving funding directly from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). In 2007, however, the company decided to outsource responsibility for accessing funding and administering its apprenticeships to West Suffolk College. "We got to the point where the bureaucracy involved in securing funding and completing the online paperwork became untenable and outweighed the benefits," Roger Tingey, group training manager, says.

At around the same time, Roger Tingey was in contact with West Suffolk College through a regional peer review group. Following a



series of meetings and negotiations, it was agreed that the college would take over responsibility for managing specific elements of Marshall Aerospace's apprenticeship schemes – namely their administration and Key Skills training – with the company retaining control over its training delivery and assessment. The company also uses Bedford College to deliver some specialist training in aeronautical engineering for part of the apprenticeship scheme.

Roger Tingey says that formalising the arrangements and drawing up the contract was a straightforward process. Transferring responsibility for organising the funding and most of the administration of the apprenticeship schemes was also seamless, although the new funding applications took a couple of months to be processed by the LSC.

Marshall Aerospace considered three or four alternative providers before choosing West Suffolk. Roger Tingey had several reasons for selecting the college: "Having worked closely with a key representative of West Suffolk on the peer review group, I had a good sense of the college's openness and professionalism. This was confirmed in subsequent discussions. The college understood, and was very responsive to meeting, my precise needs and left the scope for the company to continue to control its own standards on training delivery."

Involving the college in Key Skills

Soon after entering into the contract for West Suffolk College to administer its apprenticeship schemes, Marshall Aerospace asked the college to provide its Key Skills training. This training is delivered to all company apprentices during the second year of their apprenticeships. "Again, the college was quick to respond to meet what we needed as a business in terms of timing and delivery of the training," Roger Tingey says. The training is delivered at the company's training centre on one day a week in 10-week blocks to fit in with the company's apprenticeship programme. The Key Skills training covers five areas:

- Communications
- Application of numbers
- Information technology
- Working with others and
- Improving own learning and performance.

Marshall Aerospace expects high standards in both the training delivery and the standards achieved by its apprentices. It has not been disappointed on either count. According to Roger Tingey, the quality of the training is very good, and the lead tutor "is excellent at keeping me informed of participants' progress". The college and Marshall Aerospace sat down together at the outset and established timeframes for achievement and the college prepares weekly progress reports for Roger Tingey. The first 10-week block finished in March 2008 and all participants passed.

Evaluating the experience

Marshall Aerospace is "very satisfied" with the quality of service it is receiving from West Suffolk, both in relation to the administration of its apprenticeship programme and the Key Skills training delivery. "The college has dealt with us professionally at every turn and has been able to deliver exactly what I want, when I want," Roger Tingey says. "West Suffolk has worked very hard to make this work. The contract represents good value for money and outsourcing the management and funding aspects of the programme has lifted a significant part of the administrative burden." Any glitches or issues that Marshall Aerospace might have with either part of its contract with West Suffolk are speedily dealt with by contacting the company's designated key contact at the college. So far, the company has not felt it needed to change any aspect of its arrangement with the college. Communication between the client and provider is good, and now that the first training block is complete, the company and college plan to hold a review meeting to assess the results. According to Roger Tingey, the arrangements it has in place with West Suffolk College represent a two-way relationship, with the college keeping in close contact with him to ensure that everything continues to run smoothly.

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For more information on qualification levels see:

The QAA website – The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland:
www.qaa.ac.uk/default.asp

The Qualification and Curriculum Authority – the national qualifications framework:
www.qca.org.uk/default.aspx

For more information on Train to Gain see:

www.traintogain.gov.uk

Term	Description
BCDU	Business community development unit
BDA	Business development adviser
BTEC	A BTEC first certificate is a Level 2 qualification, equivalent to two GCSE's at A*-C grade. The BTEC qualification allows students to follow a shorter course of study than a BTEC First Diploma and offers a bite-sized experience of a vocational qualification
CoVE	Centre of vocational excellence: an award programme recognising institutions providing high quality work-based learning, now superseded by the TQS scheme
CRM	Customer relationship management system
DIUS	Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills
ESOL	English for speakers of other languages
FE	Further education
Foundation degree	A foundation degree is a vocational qualification. Courses are typically two years long for full-time students
Functional literacy and numeracy	Functional skills are practical skills in English, information and communication technology (ICT) and mathematics, that allow individuals to work confidently, effectively and independently in life
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HND	Higher National Diploma – HNDs are vocational qualifications available in a wide range of subjects. Similar to NVQs, they are designed to provide the skills and knowledge to take up technical and professional jobs
ILM	Institute of Leadership and Management
IOSH	Institution of Occupational Safety and Health
ISO 9002	An international quality management standard
Kaizen	A Japanese-originated approach to continuous improvement
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
NEBOSH	National Examination Board in Occupational Safety and Health
NVQ	National vocational qualification – NVQs are designed to develop the skills and knowledge needed to do an occupation effectively. Achieving an NVQ shows that a learner is competent in the occupation the NVQ represents. NVQs are based on a 1 to 5 scale of achievement.
ONA	Organisational needs analysis
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
SEMTA	Sector skills council for science, engineering and manufacturing technologies
SMEs	Small and medium-sized enterprises
STB	Services to business
TNA	Training needs analysis
TQS	Training Quality Standard: a framework and an assessment and certification process which recognises the best organisations working with employers to deliver training and development to people at work
USP	Unique selling point

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