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Where are the employers and what do they want?

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Foreword

Chris Baker > As Director of the Sussex Learning Network (SLN) between September 2005 and September 2008, Chris Baker was responsible for establishing the organisation, giving it leadership and direction and ensuring the work was sustained beyond the initial phase of development. He has now returned to his post as Director of the Centre for Widening Participation at The Open University.

The importance of working with employers has been accepted as part of the *modus operandi* of the majority of Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs). The approaches taken have varied enormously, and this section illustrates a few examples of the way it has been tackled by some LLNs. In many ways, it is the most difficult of all the tasks which LLNs, and higher and further education more generally, face.

The challenges are really fourfold. Firstly, there is the sheer scale of the problem. If we accept the central premise in the [Leitch review](#) that higher level skills are key to being able to compete globally, then the numbers to be trained between now and 2020 are well beyond the current capacity of the publicly funded system to deliver. Secondly, there is considerable doubt, based on past evidence, that employers see the value of training or education as an investment in their business rather than in their staff per se. Two articles reflect on this theme. [Claire Walsh](#) explores the link between training and organisational performance. In this sense, performance is taken to be both about survival and growth.

She concludes that it is difficult to accurately measure the direct benefits of training on the bottom line. Her survey of 17 award winning companies suggests that the benefits of learning might rely as much on the perceptions of senior managers or directors as on any objective measures about the actual impact on the company or productivity.

[Mark Froud](#) as Chief Executive of Sussex Enterprise (which as a Chamber represents over 2,500 businesses) questions the assumption that everyone needs or wants a dose of the same medicine – an approach from government that seeks to treat all businesses alike.

Thirdly, it is a cluttered field with the independent training providers taking the lions' share of the market; universities, and to some extent colleges, lag far behind. In the case of higher education this is because much of the training goes on at a lower level than HE would provide; it is focused on specific regulatory requirements around areas such as health and safety, or is not linked to recognised qualifications or even accredited.

The National Employer Skills Survey 2007 (LSC, 2007) estimated employers spent 38.6 billion annually on training. Gaining even a small additional share of this is appealing to a government keen to see employers as well as learners contribute to the cost of higher education. It also has attractions for some higher education providers who see an over-reliance on state funding as a threat to their longer-term sustainability.

Fourthly, the ground has shifted in the last eighteen months, for LLNs particularly. Many of them set out to engage or attempt to engage employers in shaping new qualifications, accrediting in-house provision, producing shorter courses more specifically geared to workforce development and trying to work with intermediaries such as Sector Skills Councils.

Examples of these different approaches are contained in five of the articles in this section. Details of the approach taken by Sussex Learning Network can be found in its [three year report](#). All these approaches are based on partnership working which is the *raison d'être* of LLNs.

More recently, however, the emphasis in HEFCE has changed. Employer engagement is increasingly being interpreted as being about individual institutions transforming themselves into business facing institutions, prepared to seek direct financial contributions in the form of matched funding from employers. The two approaches aren't easy bedfellows and may undermine some of the innovative work that LLNs have begun to develop.

This work is helpfully illustrated by four separate contributions that reflect the diversity of approaches which LLNs are adopting. These are a small example of many others which will emerge over the next two years. What they have in common is the value which is added by approaching the whole issue by forming partnerships to tackle complex issues that in many instances are beyond the capacity of a single institution.

The partners in some instances are employers themselves, Sector Skills Councils, other LLNs or universities and colleges. They all illustrate how responsive and flexible LLNs are to employers and the needs of the workforce.

[Sarah Gribbin](#) from YHELLN demonstrates how they have worked with Skills for Logistics and West Yorkshire LLN to develop a fit for purpose Foundation degree in Logistics.

[Rachel Longstaff](#) from Higher Futures gives an example of a joint initiative between Rotherham College of Arts and Technology and Sheffield Hallam University to support a Foundation degree in Control Technologies.

[Jan Wise](#) from Hampshire and the Isle of Wight reveals some of the difficulties in trying to link non-accredited provision to recognised occupational standards when working with SMEs.

[Alex Knight and Adele Edgar](#) from GMSA show how solutions to Continuing Professional Development can be found by forming new alliances that enable schemes developed elsewhere, in this case the Learning through Work programme of the University of Derby, to be successfully imported to other areas and adapted for use by other providers.

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Does training and developing employees improve organisational performance?



What successful, award-winning companies are doing to develop their employees

Claire Walsh > Claire Walsh, a partner in the Learning Consultancy Partnership (LCP), has over 18 years' experience in leadership development, training and management consultancy. Before moving into consultancy in 1994 she managed the training function for a division of a global organisation. She holds an MSc and a BSc (Hons) in Psychology, is a Licentiate member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and a graduate member of the British Psychological Society. She is also Level A and B qualified in occupational testing.

Introduction

This article explores the relationship between staff development and organisational performance, using the findings from our own and others' research. Our research used a semi-structured interview to investigate the views of managing directors, chief executive officers and human resource representatives who were winners or finalists in their local business awards between 2006 and 2007.

Our study explored their practices and opinions on developing their employees, and their perceptions of the impact this had on their overall business success. Seventeen small-to-medium sized companies participated; almost 30% came from manufacturing, 23.5% from information technology and 17.5% from engineering. Over half (53%) have been in business for over ten years, 29.5% have been in business for between two and five years, and 17.5% between six and ten years.

Since the 1990s there has been a plethora of research trying to test empirically the relationship between training and organisational performance, particularly in smaller firms. There is a view that there is now substantial evidence showing that investment in developing people is one way organisations can improve their productivity and other business outcomes (eg Tamkin, 2005 and Cosh *et al*, 2003). However, the research also acknowledges the complexity of establishing a clear causal link between the two. *"Returns to training are difficult to validate, despite theoretical expectations..."* (Bryan, 2006).

One of the difficulties researchers face is defining what is meant by the terms 'training' and 'performance'. If this is not clear it is impossible to compare results. To try to overcome this, some researchers have attempted to define and measure certain aspects of training – for example, whether it is formal or informal, on-the-job or off-the-job – as well as aspects of performance such as productivity, employee motivation and retention, growth and survival.

Training and productivity – is there a link?

Although the link between productivity and training has been acknowledged as hard to measure, some studies have found a significant and positive link between the two. Bevan *et al* (2005), in their survey of 3000 UK firms, found that the top third of companies out-performed the bottom two thirds by £1600 per employee per annum. Barrett and O’Connell (1999) in their study of over 600 Irish companies, found that general training (ie training in skills and knowledge that is transferable to other organisations) had a statistically significant impact on productivity growth, whereas specific training (ie training specific to the organisation) showed no such relationship. Lynch and Black (1995) found that significant and positive effects on establishment productivity were associated with investment in human capital including training. Although they found considerable differences across industry and size of business, in manufacturing improved productivity was associated with formal, off-the-job training. Due to the methodological issues of measuring and isolating causal relationships, there is still considerable debate about the influence of training on organisational productivity. There seems to be a general consensus that training does help productivity, but the research shows that this relationship is complicated and training effectiveness may depend upon its type, intensity and timing.

Does training improve employee motivation and retention?

Training has often been linked with employee motivation and engagement. Tamkin (2005) argued that training attracts good quality applicants and reduces employee turnover. She also proposed that training was associated with employee morale and engagement, especially if linked to strategy. *“The evidence is strongly indicative that skills training and other forms of investment in people help build business success”* Tamkin (2005).

For individuals, training can bring a variety of benefits. Collier *et al* (2003) suggested that employer training increased employee benefits through increased wages and Barrett & O’Connell (1999) stated that training which increased an individual’s wages, both with their existing employer and potential employers, provided a greater incentive to undertake training. Bryan (2006) argued that training is associated with a continuous learning culture that stimulates employees and helps them to cope with and manage change.

Organisational growth and training

Carter *et al* (2004), in their survey of over 18,000 Federation of Small Business (FSB) members, found the most popular methods for achieving growth were sales and marketing, and increasing management skills. However, only 40% of respondents reported undertaking any formal training on a regular basis, and 30% reported providing no formal training at all. This suggests that, although smaller firms see management training as important for growth, it may not be happening in practice.

In their survey of 2,500 UK firms, Cosh *et al* (2003) found that employee growth was positively associated with training spend. Bryan (2006) found a significant and positive relationship between sales growth and training in a study of 114 manufacturing companies in Wales. Bryan’s results also showed that employment size and external management training showed a predictive value of sales in the subsequent period, but that the relationship was weak. Jayawarna *et al* (2007) supported the argument that developing managers improves growth prospects. In their research they found a statistically significant advantage in terms of both turnover and employee growth for companies that conduct formal management training (compared to those that train informally).

Training and establishment survival

According to the DTI Small Business Service (Brown, 2006), 25% of VAT registered businesses do not survive past two years. Business survival is a key challenge for smaller firms, and there is some evidence that training has a positive impact on company survival. Collier *et al* (2003) investigated the relationship between training and commercial survival rates of British private companies over a seven-year period.

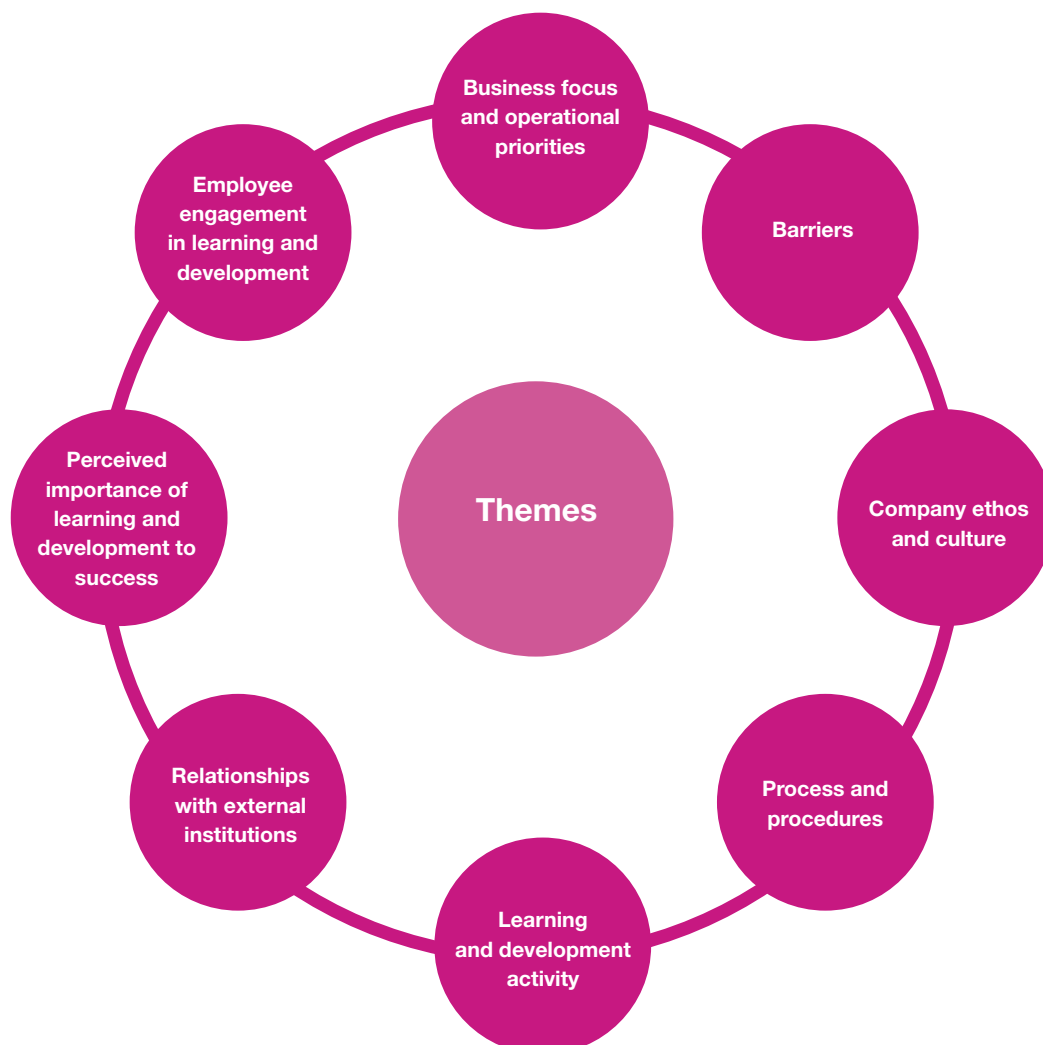
The results showed a significant difference between the closure rates of establishments that provided training (13%) and those that did not (19%), providing strong evidence of a link between training and organisational survival.

Jayawarna *et al* (2007) also reviewed the impact of training on business growth and survival and found that training intensity was more relevant as firms grew; again suggesting that training is an important aspect of growth and survival. In a review of the 2001 Labour Market Survey they also found a clear relationship between business failure and a lack of planning and training by SMEs. Others, such as Bryan (2006), also conclude that training may be a contributor to an organisation's survival rate.

The danger of this complex picture is highlighted by Collier *et al* (2003) who suggested that, because the benefits of training are so hard to measure, companies may either over or under invest, and therefore not get the optimal return from their investment.

Our research findings

We interviewed representatives of 17 award-winning companies about their views on learning, development and business performance. An analysis of the results revealed eight consistent themes:



Training and development activity

All participating organisations had undertaken some training and development over the previous 12-month period. This tended to be a mix of formal, off-the-job training and informal, on-the-job training. Some respondents employed professional staff and, for those organisations, continuing professional development (CPD) and structured mentoring played a big part in their learning and development activities. NVQs were also mentioned frequently and there was some reference to graduate placement schemes, apprenticeship schemes and work placements. A number of participants were accredited for Investors in People (IiP) and took their responsibilities seriously.

For many of the companies, statutory compliance such as health and safety training was important, particularly in the higher risk environments such as manufacturing and engineering. Some participants had focused on developing their leadership teams and activities ranged from in-house coaching and mentoring to postgraduate qualifications such as MBAs.

Business focus and operational priorities

Growth was a common theme. Participants were looking to grow either organically or by acquisition. Some companies were set for rapid growth which could result in them doubling their headcount in the next few years, others were looking to grow revenue and profits, and some were looking to expand into different overseas markets.

Participants acknowledged the difficulties of rapid growth and commented on the need to formalise processes to make them more consistent and systematic.

Growth was not the only business priority. Some organisations stated the importance of being client-focused and having appropriate quality procedures in place. There was a view that increasing employees' skills would lead to improved customer service, resulting in improved sales.

Employee engagement in learning and development

There were two aspects arising in terms of employee engagement in learning activities. The first was about the commitment of the senior management team and how willing they were to coach and mentor their employees. There seemed to be a fundamental belief in the importance of taking an active role in developing others. Some organisations had a very formal mentoring scheme in place with specific goals, reviews and timelines; this was typical in the case of developing professionals such as law or engineering. Others reported being less structured, but still active in terms of offering senior management support with ongoing coaching and mentoring activities.

The second aspect of employee engagement was the employees' willingness to get involved in training and development activities. Overwhelmingly it was seen as a positive intervention, particularly if deemed to be relevant both to the business and to the individual.

Perceived importance of learning and development to business success

Respondents were asked how important they considered learning and development to be in terms of their competitive edge and overall business success. As a group responding to a study on learning and development, it was no surprise that the comments were extremely positive.

Relationships with external institutions

Nearly all the respondents had links with external agencies that helped them with their learning and development initiatives. Many had also developed links with local schools, colleges, universities and business schools and offered apprenticeships, NVQs and work placements. Some had developed close relationships with a number of universities which helped them to recruit graduates.

As well as links with education and higher education, respondents also used government agencies such as their local Business Link, and also external, private providers. The availability of government funding was a mixed issue, with some organisations taking full advantage of initiatives like Train to Gain and other grants, while others were disappointed at being either excluded or not seeing the help as relevant and beneficial to their business.

Processes and procedures

Our interview data showed that many of the respondents had formalised processes and procedures in place. The general consensus was that this was important, particularly in terms of growing the business and ensuring compliance, consistency and quality assurance. Those who recruited and developed professional staff had formal mentoring schemes in place. Participants also seemed to have fairly formal structures in place for induction training and employee appraisals and some acknowledged the need to make the processes more formalised.

As well as processes and procedures for employee development, participants had a number of systems related to quality assurance and customer satisfaction.

Company ethos and culture

As growing businesses, many of the organisations who took part were owned or part-owned by their Directors, who were often also the founders of the company. This led to some comments about strong company cultures:

"We are not daunted by big challenges, there is a strong culture in the organisation and we are used to succeeding by being ambitious"

"The strength of our company is we have a good name and strong brand. An important factor is our MD who is a well known entrepreneur and a strong and charismatic leader"

"Our company culture involves constantly seeking to improve and this is embedded in the organisation"

Barriers

The final theme was promoted by a question in the interview template asking participants about the key obstacles to providing training and development. Overwhelmingly, the top obstacle was time, with cost and lack of resources also quoted. Only one participant raised the concern of trained employees leaving to go to a competitor.

Top three learning and development priorities

Finally, respondents were asked about their top three priorities for the coming 12 months and their responses are listed in the table below. Leadership and management development was quoted by 39% (n=7) and qualifications by 28% (n=5).

Table 1 Top three priorities for training and development in the coming 12 months

In top three	Number	Percentage
Leadership/management development	7	39%
Qualifications eg NVQs, MBAs	5	28%
Customer care	3	17%
Communication	3	17%
Continuing professional development	3	17%
Media skills	2	11%
Market knowledge	2	11%
IT skills	2	11%
Product knowledge	2	11%
Sales & marketing skills	1	5.5%
Delegation skills	1	5.5%
Performance reviews	1	5.5%
Time management	1	5.5%
Project management	1	5.5%
Equipment training	1	5.5%
Technical skills	1	5.5%
Induction training	1	5.5%
Soft skills training	1	5.5%

Discussion and conclusion

The eight major themes arising from an analysis of the data definitely seemed to show a genuine commitment from participating organisations to support their employees through learning and development initiatives. For some, this involved formal modes of training and development, such as studying for a professional qualification. For others it was less tangible, for example, soft skills training, leadership development and mentoring.

Overall, the participants regarded learning and development as having a positive impact on their business performance, although there was not much mention of how this was measured in terms of concrete outcomes. However, the importance of employees trained in customer satisfaction and quality processes was mentioned, and there appeared to be a number of quality assurance measures in place. These could be useful for evaluating the effectiveness of training interventions.

The aim of our study was to identify common themes across the data. We hope our findings provide greater insight than that which could have been gained from quantitative analysis alone. Our response rate of 17% was small, but much larger than our previous research response rate of 4.5% (LCP, 2007), perhaps suggesting that award-winning organisations are more interested and engaged in learning and development than their counterparts. Alternatively, it may be the case that respondents are more willing to engage in interviews than online questionnaires.

In conclusion, previous research has found that the approach and effectiveness of learning and development in small and medium-sized businesses are mediated by a variety of variables, including the influence of the business owner, the business sector and the size of the organisation. The findings from this study suggest that business award-winning companies take the training and development of their employees very seriously and are willing to invest time and money in learning and development they see as useful and relevant.

To get the maximum benefit from their investment, it is important that small and medium-sized companies and their training providers clearly define the purpose, outcomes and evaluation methods for their learning activities. This will help them to ensure that they both develop the capability for future growth and challenges, and deploy that capability appropriately, making sure they get real benefit and a good return on their investment.

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Partnership working with Skills for Logistics (Yorkshire and Humber)



Some of the things you always wanted to know about working with a Sector Skills Council, but never dared to ask!

Sarah Gribbin > Sarah Gribbin is Yorkshire and Humber East Lifelong Learning Network Higher Skills Team Leader.

One of the priority areas of the Yorkshire and Humber East Lifelong Learning Network (YHELLN) is 'Business and Logistics'. Our sub-region reaches from south of the river Humber, west to Doncaster and north as far as Whitby, and contains many very deprived areas. Of 354 Local Area Authority Districts in England (Communities and local Government website, 2004) our regional rankings (the lowest being the most deprived) were:

Hull	9th
Doncaster	40th
North East Lincolnshire	52nd
Scarborough	91st
North Lincolnshire	121st
East Riding of Yorkshire	208th

Skills for Logistics (SfL), the Sector Skills Council for the logistics industry, estimate that there around 231,100 people either directly or indirectly employed in logistics occupations in the region (2007). Of these, 28% hold no qualifications and a further 26% are below [National Qualifications Framework \(NQF\)](#) level 2. These low skill levels are compounded by the fact that the logistics sector only has 3% of its employees being trained to a nationally recognised qualification (compared to the average for all industry in England of 7%).

In 2008, SfL launched their *Logistics Skills Agreement* for Yorkshire and Humber. The Logistics Skills Agreement is a high level Service Level Agreement between employers and employees (as customers) and the policy makers, funders and training providers (as the suppliers). As such, the full LSA in each region is a series of agreed actions that will prepare the sector to meet the demands of the employers, employees and the economy. (Logistics Skills Agreements: A UK overview, 2008).

In order to identify training capacity within the provider network, SfL are launching a series of Regional Logistics Academies which will provide "a demand-led response to the skills development needs of the freight logistics industry" (Yorkshire and Humber Logistics Academy Business Plan Outline, 2008). This will fit strategically with their aspirations for a National Skills Academy.

Since the launch of the Business and Logistics Higher Skills Team in July 2007 both YHELLN and SfL have worked closely together. We have sought to create new opportunities to encourage vocational learners to progress into level 4+ learning. There are many possible areas of common interest.

YHELLN has undertaken a regional mapping exercise to identify current provision of Ports and Logistics training and education, to help to identify gaps and develop provision to fill them. There has been discussion about the potential role for progression agreements within the sector. The launch of YHELLN's Progression Agreement Toolkit has provided an opportunity to explore the use of these agreements for all levels of provision. One of our partner colleges is developing a Foundation degree in Logistics based on SfL's model for a Foundation degree in Logistics.

In January 2008, SfL launched their expression of interest document inviting partner organisations to set up a 'hub and spoke' Logistics Academy for the region. This bid has been awarded to a consortium of employers (including Hargreaves Training Services Ltd), providers (including regional FE colleges in Hull, York, Doncaster, Wakefield, Grimsby and Leeds), three universities from Hull, Huddersfield and Leeds, and the Transport and General Workers Union.

YHELLN discussed with representatives of the winning consortium how best to support the next stage of the process. Up to the bidding stage, all the work done had benefited from the goodwill of the consortium partners. It was clear that, if the Logistics Academy were to be successful, it must have some dedicated resource available. This would be necessary both for the completion of its Business Plan and for the identification of funding sources that could enable it to achieve its objectives.

It was agreed that the most useful support YHELLN could offer at this stage would be to provide some funding to employ a member of staff for the consortium. Given the regional (rather than sub-regional) brief for the Academy, West Yorkshire Lifelong Learning Network (who have also identified logistics as a priority area) were asked if they were prepared to match-fund any financial commitment made by YHELLN. Both LLNs have now agreed to provide funding for a part-time post.

The Sector Skills Councils' Sector Skills Agreements and the development of Skills Academies provide us, as a LLN, with an excellent opportunity to work in partnership with the SSCs and to build strong relationships with the employers they represent. It is possible that, in the future, monies for the commissioning of training and education will be funnelled via the Sector Skills Councils. Having a good relationship with SSCs will help HE providers to ensure that we can help fashion our offering to the learners and employers in a manner that meets the needs of all parties.

So what is the next stage of this exciting project? Here's my wish list! I would like to see YHELLN develop a seamless network of providers across the whole region, offering complementary programmes and courses to improve the skill levels in this sector. I would like us to take forward the early discussions around progression, not only to provide progression routes out of all courses, but also so that we can use the concept of progression agreements to inspire and raise learners' aspirations. I would like to see us offering training and education that meets employers' needs and shows them tangible returns on their investment. I hope that we can develop modes of delivery that meet both employers' and learners' needs. I would like to see the development of mechanisms to accredit in-house training courses and to look at the issue of accreditation of experiential learning.

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Tackling the skills shortage: working with employers to create a new Foundation degree in Control Technologies



Rachel Longstaff > Rachel Longstaff is Information and Communications Officer for Higher Futures.

Introduction

Higher Futures is the Lifelong Learning Network for South Yorkshire, North East Derbyshire and North Nottinghamshire. Funded from August 2006, the network covers five priority sectors: early years education; engineering; health and social care; public wellbeing; and sustainable communities. During Higher Futures' inception, we were careful to align our five priority sectors with the CoVEs (Centres of Vocational Excellence) and with existing provision in partner FE colleges. Sector Development Officers were recruited around this existing framework to begin our curriculum and progression work within partner institutions.

Employer demand

Our Engineering Sector Development Officer, based within the Manufacturing CoVE at Rotherham College of Arts and Technology, was approached in 2006 by employers requesting specialist, vocationally-based training. The employers, including Corus Engineering Steels, Cadbury Ltd, Materialise, Beatson Clark and RWEnpower, were asking for an applied programme which sat between apprenticeships and degree level.

They came together early in 2007 to discuss their training requirements and, from that initial discussion, it was clear that they all required similar skill sets based around instrumentation and control technologies. Control technologies are often used by control and instrumentation engineers, who can play a major role in industries employing modern technology. Tony Oakley and Mark Thompson, our Sector Development Officers based respectively at Rotherham College of Arts and Technology and Sheffield Hallam University, began working on a solution.

Funding

As Tony Oakley has observed, *"it was clear more investment was required if we were to address some of the skills shortages."* A funding bid was submitted to Yorkshire Forward, the Regional Development Agency, to support the purchase of equipment to address these training needs. Following the bid's success, the money was invested in control technologies equipment at Rotherham College of Arts and Technology.

Course development

During the summer and autumn of 2007, our engineering sector development team facilitated meetings between management and teaching staff at Rotherham College of Arts and Technology and Sheffield Hallam University to discuss the feasibility of a Foundation degree based around the skills needs of employers. Work began on developing a course that would meet the engineering sector's higher level skills requirements.

Employers were consulted at all stages of the course development process, with RWEnpower and Corus having direct input into curriculum content. This was made possible through several face-to-face meetings and an ongoing e-mail dialogue.

Draft curriculum content was circulated to key stakeholders and employers for comment in spring 2008. Employer feedback was incorporated and a few amendments were made to the technical content and programme length. The course validation panel met at Sheffield Hallam University on 22 May 2008 and the programme was passed.

Control Technologies Foundation degree

The Foundation degree in Control Technologies welcomed its first cohort of 22 learners in September 2008. The course develops the specialised technical skills needed for a career in developing, maintaining and upgrading computer control systems, microcomputer technology, and software and information systems hardware.

Jointly taught across Sheffield Hallam University and Rotherham College of Arts and Technology, the curriculum responds directly to employer need. The course makes extensive use of work-based learning where students apply their academic studies to the workplace.

Content can be further tailored to the learner's work through the 'Industrial Project', where the employer (with assistance from tutors) chooses the nature and content of the unit. Additional optional units, which would further embrace the specialist requirements of the employers and their sector, are also being discussed.

Successful students who complete the Foundation degree can progress onto the final year of the BEng (Hons) Control Technologies or BSc (Hons) Electronic and Electrical Engineering courses.

Collaboration through the LLN

The LLN agenda for encouraging collaborative working has contributed significantly to this and other similar development projects. Higher Futures' Sector Development Officers have been given the time and resources to focus on this project from inception to conclusion, facilitating course development work through their commitment and strong partnership links.

Mark Thompson, Engineering Sector Development Officer at Sheffield Hallam University, noted that *"the collaboration has allowed the two institutions to draw upon their respective strengths to design a course that we could not have developed independently."* The LLN's work has brought together partner institutions and local businesses to fill a skills gap to the benefit of learners, employers and the prosperity of the sub-region.

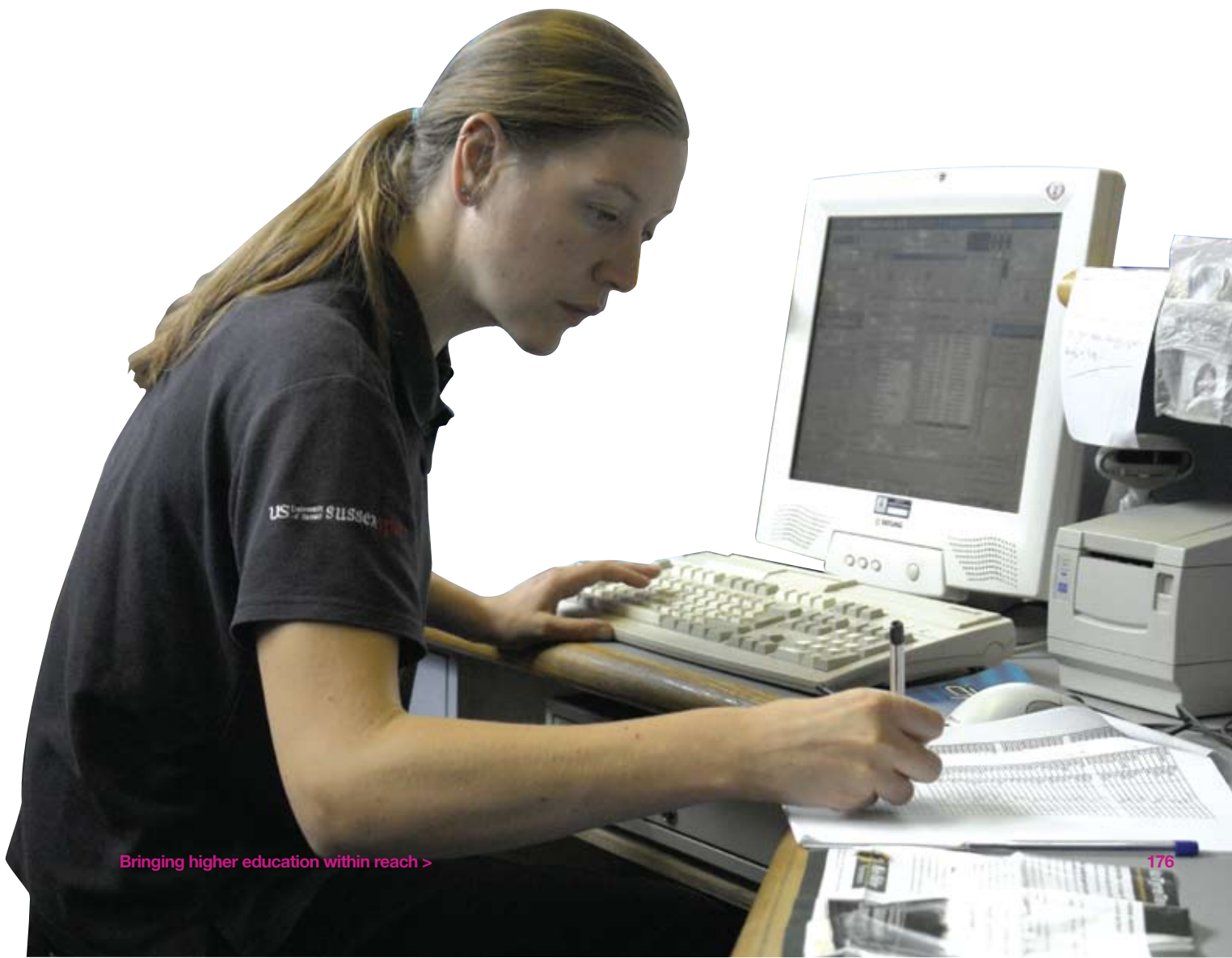
Evaluation

Partnership working and employer engagement have been the two most successful aspects of this development project. A solid working relationship has been built between delivery staff at Rotherham College of Arts and Technology and Sheffield Hallam University, with everyone involved demonstrating commitment throughout the process.

In facilitating this cross-partner collaboration, Higher Futures has provided the infrastructure and encouragement to replicate this success across other partner institutions and other priority sectors.

Many industries, including food production, printing, steel, and glass manufacture, are increasingly dependent on control systems, so it was vital to engage employers from these areas and to build the development process around their requirements and feedback. This is something we achieved successfully.

Through our Sector Development Officers, and their industry knowledge and connections, Higher Futures has been able to respond effectively to employer demand. Not only has the LLN 'added value' to existing provision, but it has bridged a skills gap to the benefit of learners, employers and a local economy in which engineering and manufacturing plays such a large role.



Employer engagement on a small scale: working with a Chamber of Commerce and SME private training providers



Jan Wise > Jan Wise is Credit and Progression Manager for the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Lifelong Learning Network (HI-LLN).

The importance of employer engagement

Recent research has concluded that there are six million adults of working age with only 'A' levels or equivalent qualifications and there is a large untapped pool of talent in the workforce that could benefit from higher education (HE). One of the remits of LLNs has been 'employer engagement'. As a relatively late starter in the LLN family, Hampshire and Isle of Wight LLN (HI-LLN) has had the welcome benefit of being able to survey the world of employer engagement through the projects and research of other LLNs. One of the HI-LLN's early priorities was to develop an employer engagement strategy that could eventually become part of the sustainable legacy of the LLN project.

The HI-LLN Core Team and the Lead Curriculum Development Managers have a variety of employment backgrounds – in HE, FE, as major employers, and as early career researchers. These staff make up the main structure of the HI-LLN team. We were therefore aware of the number of existing initiatives between employers, HE and FE. For example, HEIs, through various HEFCE initiatives, incentives and everyday affairs, engage with employers through Commercial Enterprise (tailor-made courses to suit local needs), Knowledge Transfer Partnerships, work experience opportunities, sandwich courses, work placements and research activities.

FECs engage with employers via Train to Gain, direct tailor-made courses, and by providing courses for day release students. The amount of engagement varies, but many colleges in the area are Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) which, by definition, have employer partners. Some colleges have achieved Action for Business status. All FE colleges have Business Units whose remit is to sell (usually) **National Qualifications Framework (NQF)** level 1-3 courses, and a varied programme of professional non-accredited courses, to employers. The latter frequently cover management, marketing, health and safety, customer care and speciality programmes that suit local employment needs.

HE and FE employ specialist staff to work directly with employers to establish as many business opportunities as possible to increase the central revenues of the institutions. Working with employers is a vital income stream to universities. The Learning Skills Council (LSC) has recently changed its funding arrangements so that less public money supports further education. Employer engagement is therefore a vital part of the future development of HE and FE.

HI-LLN employer engagement activities

The HI-LLN Core Team and Curriculum Development groups work through networking activities. Although employers attend network meetings, the employers tend to be used in an advisory capacity. The question that the LLN had to address was how to further engage employers so that:

- The benefits to business of higher level training were recognised and understood
- Employees are supported to move from level 3 (eg NVQ, BTEC National Diplomas or Certificates) to level 4 (eg Foundation degrees, HND) with sufficient opportunities to gain HE qualifications via a variety of educational initiatives
- Clear progression routes are established for technical staff who move into management positions
- The use of APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning) and APCL (Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning) was meaningful and provided recognised pathways for employees

The HI-LLN also recognised that employer engagement within partner institutions was often the result of many years of collaborative working. Although some large employers may be working with more than one HEI and FEC on different projects, the LLN needed to develop work with another set of businesses.

Networking with small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs)

To find out more about the business world, a member of the HI-LLN Core Team (who is a company secretary) networked extensively with SMEs and attended events held by the South Hampshire Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), Southampton E-Network, Business Link Wessex Peer Group Learning, Southampton Business Club and the Concorde Ladies Lunch Club. In February 2008 this core team member gave a breakfast talk for the FSB entitled "How important is higher level training for your business?" Thirty-nine SME owners turned out at 7.00am for the best-attended monthly breakfast event the FSB had ever held. This proved that the topic was worth discussing.

The facts and figures reflected the headlines of the [2006 Leitch report](#), such as the following statement by Prime Minister Gordon Brown in November 2007:

"And up against the competition of over two billion people in China and India – with 5 million graduates a year – Britain, a small country, cannot compete on low skills but only on high skills. Our imperative – and our opportunity – is to compete in high value added services and manufacturing; and because that requires the best trained workforce in the world, our challenge is to unlock all the talents of all of the people of our country."¹

Many of the key issues raised by Leitch were unfamiliar to the SMEs. The presentation considered why, in particular, management and leadership skills are important and delivered these messages:

- The skills of managers and leaders in the workplace are critical if the UK is to compete as a nation in the global market place
- The skills of our industry leaders will also play a key part in solving cultural problems relating to the value placed on training and skills development in the workplace
- 85% of the UK's organisations are small or micro businesses; this presents additional and unique problems in terms of the role of the manager (and/or owner manager)

There was lively discussion on the report from the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) that 41% of managers lack the equivalent of GCSE/O Level.

¹Prime Minister Gordon Brown in a keynote speech to the CBI Annual Conference 2007. Available at: <http://www.cbi.org.uk/ndbs/press.nsf/0363c1f07c6ca12a8025671c00381cc7/32fb9342737d4d578025739f00349766?OpenDocument>

"Managers are significantly under-qualified compared to other professional occupations. 41% of managers hold below a level 2 qualification. Just 38.5% of managers and senior officials are qualified at level 4 and above, compared to 80.9 % of those in other professional occupations." (CMI, 2007)

It was clear from the FSB event that employers felt that potential employees were not work-ready, and that the education system was of great interest to them.

Comments after the talk also showed that many employers were unaware of the relationship between NVQ levels and other educational qualifications. Further networking established that:

- SME representatives who had themselves taken a 'sandwich degree' valued the year of work experience more than their other study years
- By 'work-ready' employers mean, for example, good attendance and punctuality, how to talk and engage with other members of the work force (including managers), practical skills such as using photocopiers, the understanding of accepted codes of practice and behaviour, and general readiness, such as attending meetings with note taking equipment
- Time is definitely money and any information presented to employers such as letters or web pages should be easy to follow, clear and relevant
- 'Scatter-gun' approaches to businesses do not help the educationalists' cause and, if research is being carried out or approaches made for various funding opportunities (such as recent Train to Gain promotions), the educational contacts must ensure they do not waste their own and others' time
- Educationalists should be clear about the language they need to use when explaining education, especially when talking about qualification equivalences

Working with SME trainers – Train the Trainers project

The South East area is home to a multitude of private training providers who work with businesses, training the workforce and supporting managers. This project offers a free service to management trainers by matching their courses to [National Occupational Standards in Management](#). The aim is to help improve the breadth of a trainer's portfolio while introducing them to nationally agreed management standards. Since private trainers work closely with managers, the HI-LLN hopes that they will be able to encourage more people working in the business world to enrol on management training courses.

This project aims to map the management and related training, provided by Hampshire and Isle of Wight SME Training Companies, to the underpinning knowledge required for NVQ 4 Management Specifications. If there is not a clear match, the training will be mapped, where possible, to National Occupational Standards in Management. A trainer will be able to see the level that their work sits alongside. The project objective is to encourage companies being trained to understand that their CPD can contribute towards the underpinning knowledge needed for higher level qualifications such as NVQ 4 Management.

NVQs assess the skills that candidates demonstrate at work and are available at five levels, from level 1 – for routine jobs – to level 5 – for jobs with complex tasks and substantial responsibility. NVQ 4 Management is a qualification for managers and team leaders in a wide variety of areas. Level 4 candidates can expect to be middle managers and thus hold a more central management role in an organisation. NVQ 4 Management is offered by many FE colleges and training providers across Hampshire and is considered a solid evidence base for managers who either need to consolidate their learning or evidence years of experiential learning. The five mandatory units develop skills in innovation and process, operational plans, working relationships and health and safety.

This NVQ qualification uses National Occupational Standards that are at level 4 (equivalent to the level of study needed for the first year of a bachelor's degree). National Occupational Standards are bench marks of best practice.

They coherently bring together the outcomes, behaviours and knowledge required to deliver identified management functions into a tool which can be used by individual managers and their employers, in accordance with national management standards.

Managers can use standards to:

- Describe the skills they need
- Evaluate the skills they already have
- Identify the skills they will need

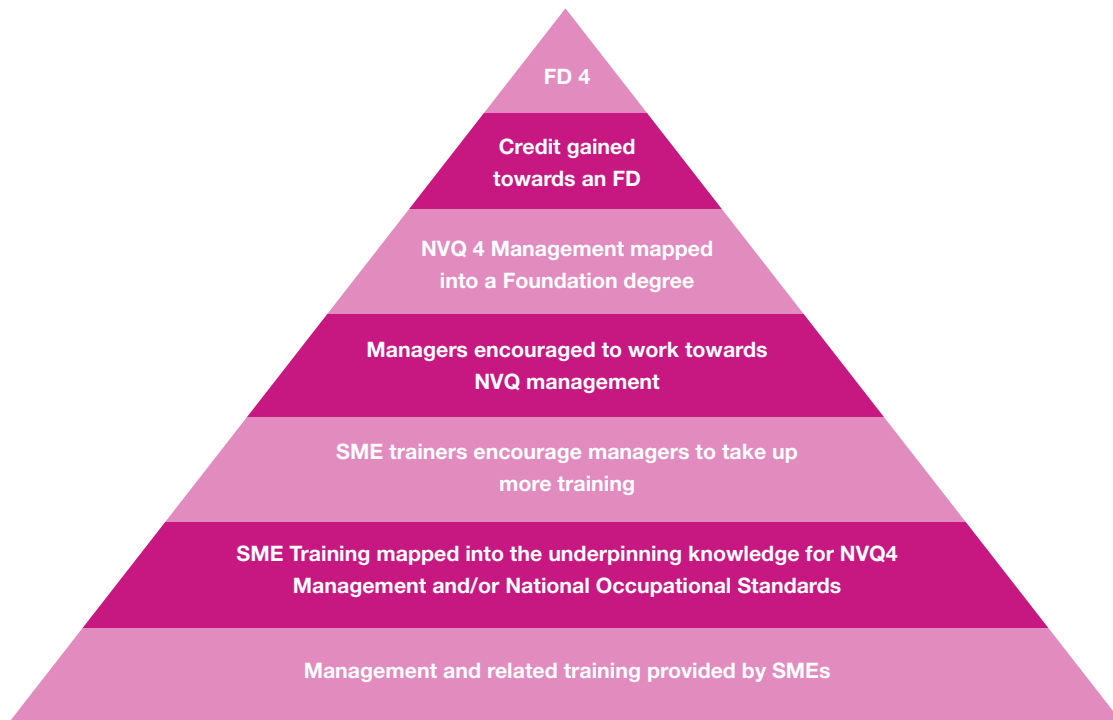
Employers can use the standards to:

- Evaluate the skills already in the workforce
- Identify skills gaps
- Plan training and recruitment

Project staff take care to emphasise to trainers that any matching to standards, in itself a benefit to private courses, can only result in the following (or similar) statements being used on any publicity materials:

- This course helps provide the underpinning knowledge needed for Unit [X] of NVQ 4 Management
- Or
- This course helps provide the underpinning knowledge needed for the National Occupational Standards in Unit [X]

The pyramid below suggests that, as trainers begin to work with customers, they are able to consider repeat business that begins to steer training towards National Occupational Standards. If the work fits with the underpinning knowledge needed for the NVQ 4 Management portfolio, trainers would be able to suggest to the managers they are working with that these level 4 qualifications could be considered. All trainers involved in the project will be given a database listing all the NVQ 4 Management provision in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, including FECs and authorised training centres.



Two local universities have agreed to map the NVQ 4 Management into:

- A Foundation degree in Leadership and Management
- A Foundation degree in Business and Management

If the above can be achieved, anyone embarking on an NVQ 4 in Management would be able to gain credits towards one of these Foundation degrees. This would mean that they would not have to study all of the Foundation degree units since they would achieve Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL).

The HI-LLN hope that these two projects will encourage managers to access the progression routes that have been established towards Foundation degrees in Management.

Working with a Chamber of Commerce and an FE College

By April 2007 Foundation degree Forward (FdF) were already working with three Chambers of Commerce. The projects were aiming to give university credit to the Business Improvement programmes that were developed by each Chamber. The HI-LLN includes the Isle of Wight which has a very active Chamber of Commerce. The HI-LLN was established too late to join in the FdF pilot projects but was encouraged by a FdF regional manager to approach the Isle of Wight Chamber of Commerce with a view to a collaborative project.

Talks with the Chamber's Director concluded that an ideal scenario would be to have an easily accessed HE qualification for the island's employees that would recognise high level management skills and potentially enable managers to transfer between different business sectors. The island's commercial directors had discussed this idea for some time and recognised that many technicians become managers without any external qualifications, and then find it hard to move sectors, whilst wanting to stay on the island. Although no-one was suggesting that managers want to gain qualifications and then move elsewhere, there was an acknowledgement that opportunities for employment fluctuate, and that some sectors prosper whilst others shrink.

To an outsider looking in, this seemed like a straightforward process: accredit the Chamber's courses, validate bite-size chunks of learning, and enable those who wished to build up a learning profile that would eventually lead to a Foundation degree. A bit like a tailor-made Open University qualification or a modular pick-and-mix one as favoured by Canadian universities – easy! Not so – a year on and the HI-LLN is still the main negotiator between all parties.

The first challenge was to convey an understanding that HEFCE generally only pays HE to accredit a minimum 20-credit stand-alone module. This means that HEFCE will not pay an FEC or HEI to deliver 5, 10 or 15 credit courses. In some special projects HEFCE will finance 5, 10 or 15 credit modules, and these are often found on Pathfinder courses and Shell projects.⁵ [The Open University](#) is successfully established along the lines of module accreditation towards a degree qualification, but qualifications are only awarded if a stated amount of points are achieved.⁶ Short HE courses can be run (and then APL'd into a degree) if funding is not sought from HEFCE, but this would be a very expensive way of achieving a degree. With salaries on the island 20% less than their mainland counterparts, this is not a realistic option.

This part of the project began to resolve itself in May 2008, when IoW College produced a substantial list of short courses that were to be advertised on the Chamber's website for members. Some courses were clearly NVQ level 1- 3 or similar, but over half of them were non-accredited and aimed at managers. The project now had a selection of courses, but no method of accrediting them at HE level. Promising talks had been held with local universities to design part-time Foundation degrees specifically for Professional Development Studies. However, these were dependent on student recruitment numbers, as at least one module needed to be delivered with one start point in the year (albeit by distance learning).

The HI-LLN met with the Isle of Wight College's Business Manager and HE manager in August 2008, to map the unaccredited short management courses currently advertised to IoW Chamber members onto the NVQ 4 in Management course. This was done with the understanding that, when delivering an unaccredited short course, the audience could be managers of different levels who would deal with the information they had received according to their position. For example, a course on team building would be as appropriate to managers leading a small team in a supermarket as to a manager of a large hotel.

Many of these short courses match the knowledge requirements for the NVQ, such as some of the Health and Safety certificates which mapped to the NVQ 4 Health and Safety units. An agreement for APL from the Health and Safety awarding bodies to the NVQ 4 is being sought. Additionally, the project hopes to agree a fast-track NVQ 4 programme for managers who have attended the short courses at the college. The college will be able to indicate on attendance certificates (where appropriate) that their un-certificated courses provide some of the underpinning knowledge for the relevant NVQ modules.

⁵HEFCE are generally unable to offer direct funding to FE colleges for individual higher education modules. The Further and Higher Education Act 1992, section 65(2)(c) defines the activities eligible for funding by HEFCE at FECs. The legislation makes it clear that a student must be signed up for the whole qualification if he/she is to meet the funding requirements. A student who has only signed up for a module cannot be described as being on, for example, an HNC or HND course where completion of a module does not in itself lead to the award of these qualifications. (source HEFCE: Circular Letters 22/2008)

⁶For further information about credit accumulation see: 'Higher Education credit framework for England' published by QAA August 2008

In terms of progression to HE, the University of Winchester's course leader for the Foundation degree in Management has already met with the HI-LLN to map the NVQ 4 Management into the first year of the Foundation degree. Although the mapping is completed, a couple of the degree modules are being altered slightly to accommodate the NVQ units. This mapping exercise will provide an agreed APL progression route for NVQ 4 Management learners onto the Foundation degree in Management at the University of Winchester. For those who have successfully completed the NVQ 4, it is anticipated that 80-100 credits will be given towards the first year of the degree.

This project, created in partnership by the HI-LLN, the Chamber of Commerce and the IoW College, now has structure and momentum. The IoW College Business Unit intends to re-focus many of their courses to match the requirements for the underpinning knowledge for NVQ 4 Management. Additionally, the project working group (HI-LLN and the IoW College staff) are devising publicity for the IoW College to provide information about progression routes from these short courses to a Foundation degree in Management, via an NVQ 4 in Management. Relevant information will be added to the list of web courses available on the Chamber's website. A training session will be provided for the IoW College Business unit on the content of the NVQ 4 to enable staff to feel confident about recommending this progression route to managers attending the short courses.

The project is a long way off claiming 'job done' but the LLN has enabled a different approach to achieving accreditation that recognises learning on short courses and in the workplace.

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Developing personalised learning opportunities for employees



Phil Margham > Dr Phil Margham is Director of Learning Innovation at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) and a member of LJMU's Strategic Management Group. Highly experienced in curricular design and delivery, he introduced many of the processes underpinning the LJMU modular credit scheme. He is also a consultant to the Greater Manchester Lifelong Learning Network which is developing the credit transfer scheme GMSA Advance.

The [Leitch report](#) (2006) points to a lack of small HE courses that match the current personal development needs of those in work, in terms of content, timing and delivery. The Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance (GMSA) has been tackling this issue head-on. The GMSA is a partnership of six higher education institutions (HEIs), 22 further education colleges (FECs) and a work-based learning partner. Their solution has been to create GMSA Advance, an online environment that supports all stakeholders involved in the learning process: employers, learners and HE providers.

By the end of the 2008/09 academic year it is planned that hundreds of credit-bearing short courses (modules) will be available via GMSA Advance, each identified by employers as offering useful continuing professional development (CPD). But the programme is much more than a shop window for stand-alone courses, some of which are work-based or online. GMSA Advance aims to be a complete package for employed learners, promoting the joining up of single modules into larger qualifications from level 4 to level 7 via a process of credit accumulation and transfer. Participating learners will become part of the Advance Learners Club and have an associated Unique Learner Number. They will have access to a wealth of advice and support materials.

In the context of the Advance programme, the GMSA's role is to promote, coordinate and support developments across the partnership. Validating bodies and their collaborative partners retain ownership of the modules and awards on offer. Being members of a large organisation operating across one geographical area creates opportunities for employees to gain credit for learning from several institutions, either by moving physically between locations, or by studying online.

Below is a brief summary of the GMSA Advance system, which will start operating in January 2009 and quickly accelerate its range over the following months. Such a high level summary inevitably masks a wide range of issues critical to the programme's success.

Working with employers

From the start, the GMSA concentrated on the challenge of building up good relationships with employers of all sizes across a wide range of sectors. We have worked through sector networks wherever possible since this allows us to gain a feel for sector-specific requirements. There has been universal support from employers for chunks of learning that can make up a package tailored to the needs of both employer and employee. There is also an interest in these learning packages carrying university awards, so that something tangible and tradable emerges from the learning process.

Working with employees

In the main, we expect the learners accessing GMSA Advance to be employees or in self-employment. For the first time, a range of CPD modules available across Greater Manchester will be presented in one place via GMSA Advance. Creating these learning opportunities immediately raises numerous practical challenges for the GMSA and its partners, including:

- The provision of information, advice and guidance about module choices and progression opportunities
- Managing learner expectations about the bespoke nature of their chosen modules (many of which will also form part of a larger full-time programme, see below)
- Providing support for learners applying to 'cash-in' credit and CPD awards achieved through GMSA Advance by incorporating the credit gained into larger HE awards
- Supporting and retaining learners who will not belong to a dedicated student cohort or a single institution and making them feel part of a larger Learning Club that promotes activities and relationships

Our GMSA providers

The key to success with the GMSA Advance programme has been gaining buy-in from individual higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs) for the creation and operation of the programme. This high-level 'in principle' support then needs to be converted to one that is understood and actioned at grass-roots level within institutions. This second phase will accelerate as individual modules are identified for inclusion within the GMSA Advance catalogue. Some partner institutions will be offering both undergraduate and postgraduate level modules; others, such as non-validating FECs, are expected to provide modules covering a more limited range of levels.

Given the range of learning opportunities available, the numbers of Advance students taking each module at any one time may be low. Therefore, module viability will be a critical issue. A significant element of the business model for the first stages of GMSA Advance operation is that modules to be included within the catalogue will be largely pre-existing, not specially created. Viability will be greatly strengthened by using modules that make up part of a larger programme, such as a Foundation degree, and yet can also function as stand-alone modules for GMSA Advance learners.

There are several challenges for partner organisations with implementing this model. One is the need to promote the supply of stand-alone modules from within existing larger programmes. However, most modular programmes frequently cross-reference between modules and assume certain fixed pre-requisite learning across the programme. The prior study levels and experience of GMSA Advance learners is likely to be extremely varied. So the individual learner will need careful guidance and support from the host institution and the GMSA itself before taking modules via GMSA Advance.

A second challenge is rather more straightforward. Not every providing institution has simple processes for enrolling on single modules that form part of a larger programme. The GMSA is actively undertaking to help institutions iron out any uncertainties about such enrolment processes.

Challenges with rules and structures

From the outset it has been understood that, for the GMSA Advance programme to be successful in encouraging employee learning from institutions across Greater Manchester, the rules and structures designed and implemented by individual partners will be of key importance. This 'partnership with autonomy' approach recognises that learners will be bound by the norms of the institution where they are studying.

This means, for example, that if a GMSA Advance learner were to take one module from one institution and one from another, there may be differing regulations about how often any failure can be referred. GMSA does not set the rules but it does seek to ensure that learners are aware of local rules and structures before engaging in learning. The good news about this particular challenge is that, in reality, there are relatively few basic differences between the rules and structures of GMSA partner institutions.

Our accrediting partners within the GMSA have agreed to recognise credit gained from learning at other partner institutions. However, there remain some differences between them as to the amount of credit that can be transferred into larger awards from partner institutions. The GMSA is seeking to persuade partners that it may be possible to relax the rules and allow a larger proportion of credit for an award to come from outside the awarding institution.

A significant challenge to promoting the accumulation of credit from a variety of topics and providers is the question of award coherence. In exploring which credits may be award-bearing, the programme seeks to include the views of employers and employees (as well as HE and FE teaching staff). We have focused on developing awards with generic content, requiring the learner to demonstrate personal and work-related learning outcomes.

The GMSA is also keen to promote innovative curricular structures – such as individually-negotiated modules and awards – which encourage the development of learner-driven outcomes and also meet the needs of employers. Where such negotiated learning is permitted by GMSA partner institutions the challenge is often one of persuading these developments to happen at the local, departmental, level. The GMSA is actively involved in sharing practice and developing frameworks that can be adopted by other partners. This would facilitate the speedy uptake of negotiated learning by academic teams.

Financial aspects of delivering modules within the GMSA Advance programme remain an ongoing challenge. We have adopted a 'pay as you learn' model to restrict the need for finances to be transferred between partner institutions. At the same time we have recognised that partners may seek to charge learners an 'award fee' for the process of counting module credits from different institutions towards a larger award outcome.

The removal of HEFCE support for Equal Level Qualifications (ELQ) remains an ongoing challenge to learners who are studying at undergraduate level for the first time. The new ruling means that, having gained a small qualification at a particular level (say a 20-credit CPD award), further study at the same academic level will often not be sponsored by HEFCE. GMSA partners are seeking to work their way around this obstacle in discussions with HEFCE.

Developing IT processes

For the GMSA Advance programme to be fully functional it requires a sophisticated IT structure. This would need to present available modules and facilitate student enrolment on a module and record assessment outcomes. Fortunately, the GMSA has been involved in a JISC-funded project that seeks to explore these requirements. This experience has helped us to develop appropriate software which should come online during 2009. One challenge will be how to facilitate the transfer of module information from institutional systems to the GMSA Advance system without duplication. We hope to address this via the development of standard data formatting (the so-called XCRI protocol) which, hopefully, will be taken up by all GMSA partners over the next few years.

The first prototype of the database system to support GMSA Advance will need to be operational in late autumn 2008, along with appropriate guidance and learner support systems. Support will be provided at local institutional level (involving extensive staff training). GMSA staff will also be available to support learner progression and their involvement in the GMSA Advance Learning Club. The potential for FECs and training providers to offer outreach support services is also being explored.

Conclusion

In undertaking to deliver Advance, the GMSA is not simply seeking to act as a broker between the learner and provider. Rather, we are seeking to change the provider side of the equation, by promoting the development of small, stand-alone modules carrying HE awards wherever possible, and matching these to the learning landscape defined by employers and their employees.

This is a huge challenge but progress so far has been good. A talented team at the GMSA is working with enthusiastic colleagues in each GMSA partner institution. We have the strong support of employers and we have set ourselves clear and realistic objectives. The academic year 2008/09 is going to be an interesting and challenging time for all of us.

For more information go to:

<http://www.gmsa.ac.uk/projects/view/?id=679>

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The University of Bolton and Skills Solutions: an employer engagement case study



Adele Edgar and Alex Knight >

Adele Edgar is the Employer Engagement Manager at the Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance, which runs the sub-region's Lifelong Learning Network (LLN). She previously held the position of GMSA Development Officer, engaging with employers for a JISC project and providing Information, Advice & Guidance and Marketing. She entered the role equipped with Prince2 Project Management training and pertinent experience from her employment at Manchester Enterprises and in large commercial businesses.

Alex Knight is the GMSA Press and PR Officer, whose role includes producing case studies to illustrate the GMSA's work. A history graduate from the University of Leeds, he came to the GMSA as a trained journalist with experience of both national and regional reporting, having completed a Postgraduate Diploma in Newspaper Journalism at the University of Central Lancashire.

The University of Bolton and **Skills Solutions** are both members of the Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance (GMSA), which runs the sub-region's Lifelong Learning Network. Skills Solutions are part of the Manchester Solutions Ltd group, a private training provider based in the North West. In the academic year 2007/08, the GMSA funded 46 strategic projects creating accredited Continuing Professional Development (CPD) provision. Many of the projects have been geared towards the development of small, bite-sized modules of higher education that specifically cater for adults already in employment.

Each CPD award created by the strategic projects, including the seven Leadership and Management modules, will be included in the GMSA Advance Initiative when it launches in early 2009. GMSA Advance is a Greater Manchester credit accumulation and transfer scheme which will allow employers to select from CPD awards at higher or further education institutions throughout Greater Manchester. Each CPD module will carry credits that can be accumulated, over time, into a larger qualification such as a Foundation, honours or Masters degree.

Creative Leadership and Management awards

The University of Bolton, in collaboration with training provider Skills Solutions, has created a suite of employer-facing CPD modules. The modules were validated this year and adult employees are already signed up, with the support of their employers, and ready to begin the work-based programmes.

The provision comprises stand-alone modules leading to CPD Certificate, Diploma and Advanced Diploma awards in Creative Leadership and Management. There are progression routes to Diploma in Management (DMS) and Masters programmes for learners who wish to continue their higher education studies.

To ensure that the modules are tailored to employer and employee needs, a flexible model of delivery provides learning within the workplace. The provision is supported by the use of e-learning materials, made accessible through the Moodle virtual learning environment. Learn Direct [Learning Through Work](#) materials are being adopted where appropriate.

The provision supports the professional development of selected staff within targeted companies and organisations – public and private sector – by giving them the knowledge and skills to become creative managers and inspirational leaders. For managers with no experience of higher education or who need to develop academic skills, two access modules are being provided. This is to allow learners to derive maximum benefit from their higher education studies. Where possible, in-company training programmes and resources will be utilised so that learning can be as relevant as possible to the workplace.

In all, seven modules have been validated, totaling 120 credits. The validation panel particularly commended the tracking and coordination of learners between different providers, and the use of work-based learning and e-learning support.

Building on previous success

In the case of Creative Leadership and Management, the University of Bolton and Skills Solutions followed a previous employer engagement success. Skills Solutions developed a series of Learning Through Work modules, which were validated by the University of Derby. Each module bore 30 credits, with the Operational Leadership and Management module, validated in January 2007, proving the most popular with employers. Skills Solutions were able to build a strong base of contacts thanks to HEFCE and ESF funding which enabled them to approach employers with the offer of free higher education tailored precisely to the needs of their business.

The availability of this free product enabled Skills Solutions and the University of Derby to catch the attention of employers in the early stages of their CPD development. Employers who have used the free training, however, are rarely motivated by cost alone. The Continuum Group, a large national organisation in the care sector, employing over 900 staff, took up the fully funded CPD offer but have since signed up to the University of Bolton validated CPDs and are entirely willing to pay for the provision. The process of developing Leadership and Management CPDs and recruiting employers has highlighted the fact that the quality of higher level skills development, and the relevance of the learning to the workplace, are the two biggest factors in creating employer demand.

A [National Qualifications Framework \(NQF\)](#) level 4 Leadership and Management CPD module at the University of Bolton costs an employer £115. Level 5 and 6 modules cost £120. The real cost of this training is much higher – over £400 – but HEFCE funding has helped reduce costs. Employers have been made aware of this fact and have been very keen to take advantage of the product's value, in the full knowledge that traditional, non-university accredited training days with less academic rigour and assessment can still cost hundreds of pounds. We have found that employers who genuinely want to equip their workforce with higher level skills are more than willing to pay for it.

Approaching employers

A critical factor in the successful recruitment of employers has been the methods used to contact employers. The use of pre-existing employer-facing organisations is strongly advocated since a cold-calling style of approach is unlikely to provoke the desired interest.

The Skills Solutions internal structure was utilised to this end. Skills Solutions' sister company, Business Support Solutions, has a team of employer-facing business advisors. A Skills Solutions team presented the Leadership and Management CPD product to these intermediaries, sending mailshots to back this up, so that the business advisors could add it to their package of business-facing products.

This allowed the partnership to tap into employers who genuinely needed short, flexible, higher level skills development. It also avoided the time-consuming process of filtering out companies for whom CPD was not the required solution.

Business Support Solutions was also able to provide details of companies who had used their one-day leadership and management training courses and who might therefore be interested in the new training and development being offered through the University of Bolton. Skills Solutions successfully used this database to target companies employing managers (in charge of large teams of employees) who did not have any formal leadership and management training. These managers may have been promoted through experience, not qualifications, so were very suitable candidates for Leadership and Management higher education short courses. The Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce also helped to inform employers. Through an article in the Chamber magazine *53 Degrees*, and through effective use of contacts at the Chamber, the partnership was able to locate interested employers and learners without needing to adopt the cold-calling approach.

Successful module development

As well as providing a template for approaching employers, the success of Skills Solutions and the University of Derby has helped the GMSA partnership to develop CPD modules exactly tailored to the needs of employers and learners. The 30-credit Learning Through Work modules were very much appreciated by employers, who valued the academic quality of work-based projects investigating their own business practices. Some learners, however, struggled to cope with the academic demands of completing a 30-credit module while in full-time employment. As a result, even shorter modules have been validated by the University of Bolton.

The new suite consists of two level 4 modules, entitled "first steps" (10 credits each); four level 5 modules entitled "Growing in Confidence" (20 credits each); and one at level 6 (20 credits) which is a work-based project. The challenge was to maintain academic standards and, just as importantly, relevance to individual businesses, while offering modules as small as 10 credits.

The 10-credit workload is very achievable for a learner without an academic background. The learner must do some academic research and then, for example, record a meeting from their workplace and produce an evaluation of that. The workload itself is very manageable but the evaluation still manages to provide the academic rigour necessary for higher education credits. The work-based project, meanwhile, maintains the employer interest.

The vital lesson learned from the University of Derby, who were able to enrol individual learners online at any time of the year, is that modules need to have flexible start times. Businesses do not run by academic calendars. Changing the university enrolment process has proved a major challenge and one that is still to be fully overcome. The University of Bolton, like the majority of universities in the country, did not have the processes in place from the outset that would make this possible. The university's strong commitment to flexible, employer-led higher education has been crucial in removing this barrier to adult learning, a process that should imminently be completed.

What do businesses need from lifelong learning? Reflections on the progress made by Sussex Learning Network



Mark Froud > Mark Froud is Chief Executive of Sussex Enterprise, the organisation for Sussex businesses. He is a member of the Sussex Learning Network Board.

In Sussex I wear many hats. First, in my day job as the Chief Executive of the Chamber of Commerce I represent over 2,500 businesses. These range from the smallest to the largest and are, in many ways, the biggest critic of the government-funded schemes aimed at helping them! Second, as a Director of Business Link which provides advice and guidance to over 30,000 Sussex businesses a year on topics as diverse as cashflow management, innovation and skills development. Third, as a Governor of Central Sussex College, one of the SLN's partners. Fourth, as the Chair of the Sussex Employment and Skills Board. Fifth, as an SLN Board member. That means I should have an informed view of the SLN's work, both from within and outside the organisation. What I do have is an insight into the views of many people on the effectiveness of the SLN.

The business community is very sceptical of government ideas that are designed to help it. 10% of them have just started up and are (rightly) focused on making a success of it and still being there at the end of year one. 20% are the aggressive entrepreneurs. These are the Richard Bransons and John Dysons of the world. They want to grow and make money. Some make it, but many do not. They are very single-minded and if they want help they will seek it out and exploit it. The government wants everyone who starts a business to be like this. I am never sure why, as it is not a reflection of the diversity that makes up Sussex or the UK. The remaining 70% of the business community, employing few people, mainly want to make their way in the world. They do not want to grow dramatically, they want to have a strong customer base, and content and happy staff. They want to see slow and manageable growth and not have sleepless nights. If they need help, they want an easy way to find it.

When, three years ago, I was asked to join the SLN Board, I was very reluctant. The thought of joining a Board that was a network of networks, that was (to all intents and purposes) just a talking shop and, at the risk of being very rude, a talking shop of academics, filled me with dread! However, David Smith of the Sussex Learning and Skills Council (LSC) persuaded me to meet Chris Baker, who had just been appointed as Director.

Chris was enthusiastic, and managed to persuade me that if the SLN Board was just a talking shop, he would not be around long. He was passionate about trying to improve the curriculum development activities inside the universities so that they better reflected the needs of the Sussex business community. He wanted to provide sensible advice and guidance to those taking courses, would listen to employers, and, most importantly, take notice and change. As a result, he persuaded me to give it a go.

Armed with this scepticism, I was pleasantly surprised that the Board had strong leadership, had well run meetings that concentrated on the issues it needed to discuss and make decisions on, was open and honest, and often laughed (many times at each other). It knew when to stop and let the team get on and deliver. Most importantly from my perspective as a Board member, its finances were managed ruthlessly to ensure that every penny was well spent and accounted for. The Board had confidence that the information in front of it was correct.

Despite my scepticism I was amazed at how easy it all seemed. Chris and his team began to get academics in different institutions to talk to each other, to work together, and to develop new curricula. I know from years of trying, that persuading academics even from the same institution to talk to each other is one step short of miraculous.

Courses started appearing that businesses actually wanted! Although progress was slow compared to the speed at which most businesses move, courses were changed and new ones developed. None of this would have happened without the SLN or the commitment from the universities and colleges to make it happen. This was not because courses were being given away free, as people and businesses were paying for them!

So what have I learnt?

The SLN has developed a set of firm foundations. It is a good start, but when working with a large number of people in different and large organisations, cultural change is complex, slow. It takes more than three years to embed so that it becomes sustainable. So, it is work in progress.

The SLN could do more about skills development – not just qualifications. However, it has to operate within the context of the rules that HEFCE and the government set. Businesses want skills and the government wants qualifications. That might change, but the SLN cannot make it happen.

The SLN (I suppose by its very nature) is still very institution-focused rather than customer-driven. It could develop a sales-driven model. This would mean that the institutions would value curriculum development and progression accords to the point of being willing to pay for them, but this requires a radical change in attitude. We will only realise the SLN's true value if it isn't there.