

Report summary

Good practice in involving employers in work-related education and training

This survey set out to determine the benefits of employers' involvement in government-funded work-related education and training, to identify the features of good practice and the ways in which the provision could be further improved. Between September 2009 and April 2010, inspectors visited 30 providers of work-related education and training that had been judged to be good or outstanding at their previous inspection and with key strengths in involving employers in planning, delivering or reviewing provision. Inspectors found benefits for employers, learners and providers in the provisions visited.

The employers gained well-skilled and knowledgeable staff who understood their work roles and contributed effectively to business performance. Staff were generally better motivated and retention had improved as a result of employers' involvement in, and commitment to, training. Employers with small businesses had often received good business support from specialist training providers to help them keep up to date with changes in legislation or current business practice. Twenty-two of the providers visited helped employers to obtain public funding for training.

The education and training providers also benefited, and had enhanced their own offer to learners by involving themselves with employers. The physical and learning resources they were able to provide for learners were modern and made good use of employers' advice on current industry practice. They were able to expand their range of courses or the level of qualifications that they offered, and increase recruitment. The vocational knowledge and skills of their staff improved, as did their understanding of the needs of employers.

Even in the case of the good and outstanding arrangements that were surveyed for this report, which were having clear benefits for the employers, it was overwhelmingly the education and training providers that had initiated the relationship. In 26 of the 30 providers visited, the involvement was at the instigation of the providers rather than the employers. This has considerable implications in terms of promoting demand-led training. Employers rarely made the first move to establish the relationship and become involved in or influential in the provision of education and training to meet their needs. None of the working relationships seen

in this survey had been initiated by external organisations such as the brokerage service.

It was easier to find examples of good involvement by employers when learning at work was an integral part of the learners' or participants' programmes, such as work-based learning and employability programmes. Employers were less involved in work-related courses which were delivered on college premises or on training providers' premises. In these cases, when employers were involved it was often with work-placements on courses that required them, such as health and social care courses, or as part of a programme of guest speakers.

Involving employers was most successful when the employers and the providers worked in an effective partnership in which each recognised and valued what the other contributed. In these cases the education and training providers contributed their skill and expertise in needs analysis, teaching, training, learning and assessment. The employers contributed technical skill and expertise and an understanding of work practice within the sector. Mutually beneficial partnerships resulted in which the skills and expertise of both sides were brought together.

In some cases, partnerships influenced course content and delivery at local level, and in other cases influenced the regional and national development of qualifications. Typically, inspectors found this regional or national influence exercised by the larger providers visited, such as the colleges. Although the smaller providers visited had a good understanding of the needs of the employers they worked with, they had fewer opportunities, such as through local or sector partnerships, to influence regional or national developments.

Key findings

- Good employer involvement had benefits for employers, providers and learners. The quality of provision improved and employees gained the skills valued by their employers. Learners made better progress towards their qualifications and were better prepared for employment.
- Almost all of the involvement of employers seen during the survey was at the instigation of providers. Employers rarely took the initiative to make or maintain contact with providers or to influence provision.
- None of the working relationships seen in this survey had been initiated by external organisations such as the brokerage service.
- The involvement of employers was most successful when the provider's commitment to working with employers was clear, communicated effectively to all staff in the organisation, and was well understood and supported by managers.
- In the best examples of employer involvement seen in the survey, strong partnerships were formed between employer and provider, in which each recognised and valued the other's contribution to developing provision to meet employers' and learners' needs.

- Size or lack of resources often made it difficult for the smaller provider and employer partnerships visited to influence the strategic planning and development of provision locally or nationally.
- Regular meetings with employers and frequent visits to their premises to identify their needs and discuss training were a strong feature of good practice. These visits were particularly effective when they were well documented and coordinated by the provider.
- Working with employers to develop resources and training materials was a highly effective mechanism of involving employers in developing the provision and in ensuring that it met employers' and learners' needs.
- In the best examples, providers trained employers' staff as mentors and coaches to improve links between on- and off-the-job training and the quality of provision for learners.
- The providers visited gave employers good information on work-related education and training and reduced barriers to their participation in education and training. They made clear the respective roles and expectations of providers and employers and successfully managed potential tensions between employers' needs and the requirements of national qualifications.
- The providers' staff surveyed improved their knowledge of their industry sectors and the demands of particular employment fields as a result of their engagement with employers. However, this development was not always part of a planned training programme, and good practice in involving employers in one area of learning was often not shared effectively across an organisation.
- The nature of employers' involvement depended on the type of provision and, often, on the sector. Some provision, such as work-based learning, lent itself more readily to involving employers. When work experience or work placements were built into a sector's vocational training and qualifications, they also helped to improve the involvement of employers.
- On full- and part-time work-related courses delivered at providers' premises, the better providers made suitable use of presentations by employers but insufficient use of real work case studies for learners' development and assessment. Local employers were not always sufficiently involved in designing these courses.
- Many of the providers visited did not use employers sufficiently in initially assessing learners or in their progress reviews. Providers also did not make sufficient use of their links with employers to evaluate their courses as part of their quality improvement programmes.

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