



Employer Needs and the Development of Provision

RESEARCH REPORT PREPARED FOR
LONDON LEARNING & SKILLS
COUNCIL BY IFF RESEARCH LTD
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Learning+Skills Council
London Central

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Research Report

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Foreword

Much is written about the skills gaps and shortages experienced by employers. It is often taken as written that this is due to a mismatch between the knowledge and skills being provided through the education and training system and the needs of businesses. This study sought to identify the nature of these mismatches and to understand the mechanisms through which information on employers' skills needs are fed through to providers.

The report highlights the fact that providers have substantially changed their provision over the last five years. Learners are experiencing a different curriculum and different methods of delivery to previous cohorts. However, there is still a view that the speed of change and the nature of this change could be improved. For this to happen, there needs to be a flow of relevant information from those who recruit, train and manage staff and those organisations tasked with the provision of education and training. The report highlights the variety of methods currently being used and identifies other sources of information which could be more fully utilised.

The purpose of commissioning this study was to assist the discussion as to how the link between employer needs and the development of provision could best be made. The steering group for the project began the process of producing an action plan based on the findings from the report and it is expected that this will be developed with the involvement of all those with an interest in improving the quantity and quality of these links.

We would like to thank the steering group for their assistance with this project. The group included representatives from the 5 London Learning and Skills Councils, the Sector Skills Development Agency, the London Development Agency, the Association of Colleges (London Region), Business Link for London, the Government Office for London and the Learning and Skills Development Agency.

Finally, we would like to thank IFF Research for the undertaking of the fieldwork and for the production of this valuable report.

Mike Fenton
Head of Strategic Planning and Research
London Central Learning and Skills Council

Employer Needs and the Development of Provision

1 Executive Summary and Recommendations

- 1.1 This report summarises the findings of a study conducted by IFF Research on behalf of the London Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) in early 2004. The research sought to explore the mechanisms that providers use to collect, collate and respond to information on employer skill needs, and the effectiveness of these methods. It also aimed to identify any mismatches between employer needs and the skills and knowledge base of job applicants coming from Level 2 and 3 provision.
- 1.2 The study consisted of a total of 163 qualitative interviews conducted both face-to-face and by telephone among providers, Further Education and private providers delivering work based learning, and employers, and also Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), trade bodies, recruitment-related organisations (Jobcentre Plus, recruitment agencies and Connexions) and a small number of awarding bodies. The study covered eight sectors.

How providers collect and use information on employer needs to alter provision

- 1.3 The degree to which providers try and are able to engage employers in a dialogue about their skill and other needs varies widely. Some colleges use a range of mechanisms and clearly have a deep understanding of their sector. At the other end of the scale are those who see the course as about delivering learners for Higher Education (this was a strong theme in New Media, where the job market was seen as predominantly a graduate job market) and who have virtually no dialogue with employers at all.

- 1.4 In some sectors, strong forums exist which provide a sector-wide focus for discussions on skill requirements. In the Early Years area, for example, Early Years Partnerships involving local authorities, providers and employers play a very strong role. In some ways this is a relatively uniform sector where the range of employers and occupations is quite tightly defined. The Health area also has strong employer-led groups helped by the existence of easily identified key employers (i.e. large hospitals). In construction various groups have existed (e.g. North East London Training Group) but were described as informal and more about providing networking opportunities than for discussions about employer needs. The CITB have set up the London Construction Skills Forum to produce a body focussed on skills issues.
- 1.5 In other sectors such as New Media and Life Sciences (where we looked at technician roles such as laboratory technicians), there was little or no reference to such bodies existing, and in these sectors the types of employer, occupations and hence skills are not so easily defined. In part, this may be a communication issue, with some relevant forums only relatively recently set up by Sector Skills Councils and the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA). In both these sectors, providers found it hard work to obtain any meaningful dialogue with employers. In New Media some of the difficulty of building employer engagement is the preponderance of niche Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), together with very large employers like the BBC or Sky who are hard to break into in part because they are not heavy recruiters of people from Further Education.
- 1.6 At the moment there appears to be little awareness of the forums the SSDA have been setting up. The LSCs, SSCs and the SSDA could work to 'kick start' forums in sectors that are not covered, and act to use its weight to encourage participation of key employers and providers in those that exist currently.
- 1.7 The challenge in other sectors is to ensure that skills are raised higher up the agenda at forums where employers and providers meet. Some providers admitted that although they meet with employers on these occasions, discussions specifically on skill requirements and how these may be changing were rare.

- 1.8 It was clear that those providers with staff or visiting tutors working in the sector felt that this was one of the best means of having direct and first hand experience of developments taking place within the sector. Clearly this is something to be strongly encouraged, as are secondments or a certain number of days per year staff were given to undertake real work in the sector. One common complaint from employers is that they feel tutors are often out of touch because they have been sometime out of the sector. Providers could do more to convey the work their staff undertake in the sector to employers.
- 1.9 Where it existed, providers felt the existence of a person in a workforce liaison role was a key aspect of their employer engagement and their developing increased understanding of employer needs. This benefit might be diluted, however, to some extent, by this role being shared across a college as opposed to being sector-specific. Resource pressure and a lack of time to go out and talk to employers was the key barrier to providers gaining more of an understanding of employer needs. Many of those without staff in a liaison role had plans to introduce this, or indicated more loosely that they would like to create such a position. The LSC may wish to consider ways to assist and encourage colleges to develop this role.
- 1.10 Another very powerful mechanism for gaining understanding of developments in the sector was where providers had commercial operations on site (examples included a restaurant and a beauty salon). While this represents something of an 'ideal' situation, clearly in many sectors such a set up would be impractical.
- 1.11 Informal links and general networking with employers were often seen as just as important as some of the more formal procedures and mechanisms in place. Clearly though, for formulating best practice in engagement, this is something impossible to formalise.
- 1.12 Regarding other mechanisms and processes for gaining information on skill needs, there are a number of areas where opportunities are clearly not being maximised:
- Very limited use appears to be made of contact with employers. When on-site assessments are being undertaken or when visiting work placements, these visits are only used for inspecting how well the individual is getting on, instead of using this contact as an opportunity to discuss general issues such as the skills-needs match. Effectively these visits are wasted opportunities if these broader skills issues are not being discussed with employers.

- Furthermore it does not appear as if information from those on work placements is being used in any systematic way to discuss what skills they have needed and been using. One college required all students to present a report on their work experience to the other students. As well as being a useful exercise for the student, this is also a way of potentially gaining understanding of goings on in the sector.
- Few colleges or providers engage in formal dialogue with employers about the appropriateness of the range and content of their provision. One reported asking employers to review the planned prospectus each year, but this was the exception not the rule. The LSC may have a role to play in stipulating providers for evidence of employer feedback on course provision.

1.13 Use of survey data and reports on skills needs within their sector was minimal. Few reported ever receiving such information, none appeared to actively seek it and those who were aware of such information skimmed it in a very headline way. Some felt the information was rarely specific enough i.e. it was not specifically local, or the sectors were too broad. Given the wealth of information that has been collected on skill needs from employers by the LSC, SSCs and the SSDA these organisations should consider how this information can be better communicated to and utilised by providers. This may need some further work to see what exactly providers would find useful in terms of the format, the content and detail, how industry specific this needs to be, etc.

Barriers to provision being more tailored to employer needs

1.14 While providers generally felt they were delivering the skills needed by their sector, there were a number of barriers widely identified which prevent them from delivering courses which are more tailored than at present to employer needs.

1.15 Key here is having to operate within what are seen as very prescriptive qualification frameworks, and taking the view that there is very little opportunity within the qualifications to adapt provision to meet the needs of an individual employer (or employers in general). Indeed some cited the fact that awarding bodies have to consult the industry on any changes to qualification frameworks and that by delivering the qualification they must be meeting the needs of the sector. Certainly such a 'passive' mentality needs to be discouraged (especially as a number of providers questioned the actual depth of consultation that has taken place). However, one element encouraging this passivity is a lack of flexibility within qualification frameworks. Thus even if providers went out to employers and found the qualifications did not meet their needs, there is little that providers feel they can do, within the qualification frameworks as they stand, to alter the offering.

- 1.16 The unitisation of some qualifications, which is expected in 2005, should allow a level of flexibility in 'building' courses to meet employer needs more closely.
- 1.17 An area where the LSC has more direct influence is funding. A barrier to delivering bespoke provision for individual employers was that LSC funding requires a qualification outcome; hence any bespoke provision needs full cost recovery.

Employer views of the suitability of provision in delivering the skills needed – and mismatches

- 1.18 There was a fairly wide spectrum of views from employers, from those praising the responsiveness and adaptability of providers to those critical of the skills of people coming off FE provision. Criticisms were occasionally on sector-specific skills issues, but were more often about shortcomings relating to **generic and soft skills**, in particular communication skills, team working, the ability to follow instructions and attitude. **Basic skills of numeracy and literacy** also remain a continued area of concern. There was also felt to be a lack of **commercial awareness** which some employers thought could be given higher priority by providers.
- 1.19 Recruitment organisations confirmed the crucial importance of generic and soft skills: employers tell them they are looking for (and often find lacking) positive attitude, motivation, willingness to learn, time keeping, good communication skills, etc. Feedback on job-specific skills required or lacking is much less frequent. Whilst their core interest is for people to have the key skills for that occupation, most employers expect to have to train and develop those skills as opposed to expecting somebody completely job ready.
- 1.20 Providers were generally well aware of issues to do with basic skills and the importance placed on generic, soft skills. There was less sign that they are aware of issues surrounding a lack of commercial awareness among their students.

- 1.21 When comparing what are regarded as the key skills by employers and by providers for the main occupations covered by the research, differences were more of emphasis than of omission. Both sides share similar views on what the main job-specific skill needs are. Where there were employer criticisms in regard to job-specific skills these tended to be in relation to the ability to perform the most basic skills in that area of work. Examples included basic carpentry, basic cooking techniques and the ability to write an exercise programme. Chapter six of the report compares in detail, on an occupation-by-occupation basis, the skills that employers and providers say are key.

Employer guide to training

- 1.22 There is general support for the idea of an employer guide to training. The main concern voiced by some is that there is already a lot of information available on training provision. A guide needs, therefore, to be something different that will not simply add further information that may confuse.
- 1.23 The balance of opinion was towards a guide which provides basic details in hard copy and which directs people to where they need to go for further more detailed information (such as on who provides the courses, when, how much they cost etc). It was assumed by most that the hard copy information would be supported by a central website / database or CD-rom which will be easily searchable.
- 1.24 Respondents from all groups covered in the research commented on the confusion that exists among employers about qualifications. Many saw this as the core thing that the guide needs to cover. This includes:
- What particular qualifications mean and involve
 - What employers can expect from someone achieving a particular qualification
 - What qualifications are appropriate for what level of experience (especially what is right for someone who has many years experience but no or outdated qualifications)
 - How different qualifications inter relate.
- 1.25 A key requirement of a guide, in whatever form, is felt to be that it appeals to SMEs. Large employers are already generally well informed about training provision. The challenge will be to make it something that stands out and is not more information on training that goes straight into the bin.

2 Introduction

- 2.1 This report details the findings of a pan-London study conducted by IFF Research on behalf of the five London Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs).
- 2.2 The background to the research is the necessity within the Strategic Area Review (StAR) process to produce detailed analysis of employers' skill needs. However, it is evident that these skills needs are not static, and procedures by which these changing skill needs can be identified must be considered to enable timely modification and updating of provision.
- 2.3 The broad aim of the research was therefore to assess by what mechanisms, and to what degree, providers collect, collate and respond to information on employer skill needs. More specifically, the key objectives of the study were to:
- Assess how training providers collect and use information on employer skill needs, and how this is used to inform and alter the pattern of their provision
 - Evaluate which of these processes and mechanisms appear to work best, or in which sectors there is particularly close fit of provision with employer need. Then to recommend how the processes for acquiring information on employers' skill needs could be improved
 - Identify any areas of mismatches between employer needs and the skills and knowledge base of job applicants
 - Recommend how the flow of information from providers to employers could be improved, this to inform thinking on a potential London-wide *Employer Guide to Training* (one of the suggestions from the Skills Strategy published in July 2003).

Methodology

- 2.4 The methodology used was an initial stage of exploratory desk research, followed by primary, qualitative research. We discuss each in turn.

Desk Research

- 2.5 The desk research sought published reports and information on the broad subject areas covered by the current project. This was to inform the design of the questionnaires / topic guides for the qualitative phase and to help contextualise the findings.

- 2.6 This report does not present findings from the desk research in a separate section, though they are referred to throughout the text
- 2.7 A second element of the desk research was to explore the extent to which courses at FE colleges in London had changed over the last five years or so. This was done by collecting past prospectuses of London colleges for the subject areas of interest. We present some examples of the degree of change in provision in chapter 3.

Qualitative Fieldwork

- 2.8 Rather than attempt to cover all occupational sectors where LSC funds provision, it was agreed with the project Steering Group to concentrate on eight sectors, and then two or three specific job roles within each sector. The sectors were chosen to get a good spread by the type of work they involve and the type of people they attract. The specific job roles were selected with a view to the types of jobs suitable for someone qualified to Level 2 or Level 3 might take up. The areas chosen were as follows:

Sector	Specific occupations
Construction	Gas fitting Carpentry and joinery Electrical installation
Childcare and Early Years	Childminders Nursery assistants
Tourism and Hospitality	Chefs Customer care / front of house
Retail Operations	Sales and marketing Store Management Customer Care
New Media and Creative	Web design Video / film production Graphic designer
Life Sciences and Electronics	Technicians Lab technicians
Health and Social care	Health care assistants Care home workers
Fitness and beauty	Beauty therapy Fitness instructor

- 2.9 As a note the occupations chosen within sectors do not necessarily tie in with the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) sector footprints, for example while CITB-ConstructionSkills covers carpentry and joinery, gas fitting and electrotechnical fall within the remit of SummitSkills.
- 2.10 A total of 163 qualitative interviews were conducted. These were conducted both in person and by telephone. Because of the longer length, provider interviews were nearly all conducted face-to-face. The vast majority of the remainder were undertaken by telephone.

2.11 Interviews were conducted with the following five categories of respondent. The table also shows the number of interviews conducted with each category of respondent.

	TOTAL
Training providers	62
Employers	61
Trade associations / employer bodies and	9
Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) including aspirant	8
Recruitment and careers organisations, covering recruitment agencies, Jobcentre Plus and Connexions staff	20
Qualification Awarding Bodies	3

2.12 With training providers the head of department was usually interviewed, though in a few cases a course tutor was interviewed. The providers themselves were selected to:

- Concentrate mainly on FE colleges, while also covering private work-based learning providers
- Cover Centres of Vocational Excellences (COVEs) where these existed in that sector. This was on the basis that it was likely to be these colleges that might be exhibiting 'best practice'
- Achieve a good spread across the five LSCs.

2.13 It should be noted that the total number of provider interviews refers to *individuals* interviewed not different colleges or providers – in many large colleges we interviewed across a range of subject areas. Appendix A lists the providers covered by the research.

- 2.14 Employers qualified for inclusion against two criteria. First, that they employed staff in the occupations covered by the research and second, that over the last two years they had either used a local (London) provider to deliver training for that occupation or had recruited staff for these occupations who had recently completed a relevant course at an FE college or other provider. Names of suitable or potentially suitable employers came from a mix of methods including leads provided by the LSC and other project partners, names being provided by providers and other respondents we interviewed, and from the desk research. We spoke to the person in charge of training and recruitment issues, or, in small companies, the managing director or owner.
- 2.15 For recruitment-related organisations we spoke to a person with responsibility for the specific occupations being covered. With Jobcentre Plus this proved relatively difficult, as staff tended not to be structured in an occupational specific way.
- 2.16 For trade bodies and SSCs we asked for the person who deals with skills and training issues within the sector in the London area. The names of the organisations contacted again came through a mixture of methods, including identifying relevant SSCs or leading sector-bodies, leads from survey partners and through a snowballing process (i.e. asking each person interviewed for suggestions of other appropriate organisations).
- 2.17 For the qualification awarding bodies, we spoke to the person who dealt with qualification frameworks for that occupational area.
- 2.18 The semi-structured questionnaire used for these five groups all followed a similar structure but were varied as to depth, length, and of course, perspective. The different versions of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix B.
- 2.19 Fieldwork took place from 12th January to 18th March 2004.

3 The extent of change in provision over the last 5 years

- 3.1 Provision is not static over time. FE colleges and other providers change their offering in terms of the range and content of courses - especially those at Level 2 and 3 that are of particular interest for the current study. Indeed, part of the assumption behind this research study is that provision does change, but the mechanisms by which this happens, the reasons for these changes, and their success in better meeting employer needs, are less clear.
- 3.2 Hence as part of the exploratory desk research we examined the extent to which provision has changed over the last five years. The same issue was also covered in the discussions with providers, where we also looked at the motivations for any changes. In this chapter we examine findings on these issues, looking at:
- How provision has changed over the last five years
 - Why change has taken place, particularly the extent to which change sought to better meet employer skill needs
 - Why change has not taken place.

How provision has changed over the last five years

- 3.3 Providers were asked about changes in provision over the past five years in terms of content, delivery and range of courses offered within the occupational area being covered for the interview. Nearly all reported at least some change, and overall a wide range of changes was recorded. This ranged from significant alterations to provision (such as the switch to NVQs) to relatively minor changes.
- 3.4 The main ways in which provision was described as having changed were as follows:
- **Changing the qualifications being taught.** The introduction of NVQs about 5 years ago in some sectors (e.g. construction) was one example of this. This caused change in delivery method (more practical and less exam based, and more training taking place at employers) and in means of assessment. Others had dropped various qualifications, two examples in childcare being the Diploma of Nursery Nursing and the Certificate of Playgroup Practice.
 - **Offering a wider range of courses or modules.** For example extending provision to include more short courses or to include courses at different levels (e.g. introducing pre-entry level courses). Others spoke of providing more courses at Level 3 than five years ago.

- The **content** of what is taught on a given course adapting in response to such things as:
 - changes in the qualification framework
 - legislative change, for example an increased emphasis on health and safety in construction and some other sectors
 - modernisation of working practices, for example in health care following new NHS directives on handling of body fluids
 - simply keeping up to date, for example the gas pressures that gas fitters need to work with changing in line with the EC.
 - changes in the 'market', for example more ethnic and fusion cooking being taught within catering courses.
- **Increased flexibility of courses, especially offering more weekend and evening courses.**
- **Changed delivery of courses** with examples including more responsibility being placed on the learner compared with five years ago (a move away from a 'chalk and board' approach) and, in one college, a move from the course largely involving following a cook book through from start to finish.
- **Greater use of IT and technology** across many courses, with more learning in their own time using IT, videos and CD-rom. One more specific example was the move to digital technologies in multimedia.
- **Increasing support for numeracy, literacy and ESOL**, and greater incorporation of basic skills within all aspects of the course rather than a stand-alone element.
- A few spoke of increasing concentration on teaching the key skills (an example was in catering and in health and social care).
- Undertaking **more bespoke courses for individual employers.**
- A change in the demographic profile of those on provision, for example from most having been unemployed to the majority being employed.

3.5 Although in many cases the change has been relatively gradual, in some cases the extent of change was quite significant. Three examples of such cases are provided:

Westminster Kingsway College – Catering

- Undertakes pilot projects with Workforce Development Federation as part of their COVE briefing (unitization was one of these)
- Extended the range of courses and are planning to use new unitization options to help employers 'build their own' courses
- Have weekly meetings and demonstrations with suppliers, chefs, hoteliers and Human Resources representatives to present what the college can offer them and gather information on their skills requirements – these are high profile forums attended by some celebrity chefs
- Hold and enter competitions which become an opportunity to talk to employers and other training providers
- Have designed a number of courses in conjunction with employers, for example Carluccios, as a response to widespread lack of support for NVQ
- Are encouraging employers to commit to funding the teaching hours that LSC does not cover

London College of Beauty Therapy - Beauty

- Have made changes in line with the changes to the NVQ (in beauty this means that for Level 3 skills which were classed as 'additional skills' in the past are now core – massage and electricals, aromatherapy and electroepilational)
- Also through their own salon on site they provide a customer service training and retail skills which is not an element of the structure of the NVQ as this is a major employer requirement
- Put extra emphasis on Key Skills and IT in response to employer needs
- Provide unit-based courses to meet specific employer needs e.g. manicure and nail extension courses to help supply the nail industry

Southwark College – Health and Social Care

- Going through changes to reflect those within the NHS
- Increasing team work with other FE colleges with the aim of engaging employers across the region and getting local people into local jobs
- Working with Guys and St Thomas' Hospital on a Skills and Knowledge framework, once this is established the courses for upskilling staff will be amended
- Produced support materials like CD-roms on key skills that can be done within the workplace.

3.6 Part of the desk research involved obtaining past prospectuses and assessing the yearly adjustments to the range of courses offered. Examples of the degree of change, one for each sector, are shown on the following page. Underlined are the instances where courses had been dropped, in bold those that have been added. Numbers in brackets show the number of different courses at that level. One clear pattern was that nearly all colleges are offering a greater number of courses now compared with five years ago.

<p style="text-align: center;">South Thames College - Childcare</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td> <p>5 Years Ago</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NVQ level 2 (2) NVQ level 3 (2) BTEC diploma BTEC national diploma <u>BTEC HNC</u> <u>BTEC HND</u> <u>PLA diploma</u> </td> <td> <p>Now</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General (2) ESOL NCFE certificate CACHE certificate (2) BTEC diploma BTEC national diploma NVQ level 2 (2) NVQ level 3 FMA AMA </td> </tr> </table> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: small;">In all examples underlining indicates a course that has been removed and bold italics indicates an additional course</p>	<p>5 Years Ago</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NVQ level 2 (2) NVQ level 3 (2) BTEC diploma BTEC national diploma <u>BTEC HNC</u> <u>BTEC HND</u> <u>PLA diploma</u> 	<p>Now</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General (2) ESOL NCFE certificate CACHE certificate (2) BTEC diploma BTEC national diploma NVQ level 2 (2) NVQ level 3 FMA AMA 	<p style="text-align: center;">Hackney Community College - Construction</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td> <p>5 Years Ago</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General City & Guilds Pre-foundation <u>NVQ level 1</u> NVQ level 2 (2) <u>NVQ level 3 (2)</u> BTEC certificate <u>Higher national certificate</u> </td> <td> <p>Now</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General (6) City & Guilds (3) Pre-foundation NVQ level 2 (2) NVQ level 3 BTEC certificate (2) BTEC diploma (2) </td> </tr> </table> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: small;">Numbers in brackets indicate the number of courses offered at that level</p>	<p>5 Years Ago</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General City & Guilds Pre-foundation <u>NVQ level 1</u> NVQ level 2 (2) <u>NVQ level 3 (2)</u> BTEC certificate <u>Higher national certificate</u> 	<p>Now</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General (6) City & Guilds (3) Pre-foundation NVQ level 2 (2) NVQ level 3 BTEC certificate (2) BTEC diploma (2)
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<p>5 Years Ago</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General City & Guilds Pre-foundation <u>NVQ level 1</u> NVQ level 2 (2) <u>NVQ level 3 (2)</u> BTEC certificate <u>Higher national certificate</u> 	<p>Now</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General (6) City & Guilds (3) Pre-foundation NVQ level 2 (2) NVQ level 3 BTEC certificate (2) BTEC diploma (2) 				
<p style="text-align: center;">Lambeth College - Beauty & Fitness</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td> <p>5 Years ago</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General (2) VTCT NVQ level 2 (1) </td> <td> <p>Now</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General (3) VTCT NVQ level 2 (1) VTCT certificate (1) VTCT diploma (1) Adult vocational access entry level 1/2/3 AS/A Level BTEC diploma </td> </tr> </table>	<p>5 Years ago</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General (2) VTCT NVQ level 2 (1) 	<p>Now</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General (3) VTCT NVQ level 2 (1) VTCT certificate (1) VTCT diploma (1) Adult vocational access entry level 1/2/3 AS/A Level BTEC diploma 	<p style="text-align: center;">South Thames College - Retail</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td> <p>5 Years Ago</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>NVQ level 2 (2)</u> <u>NVQ level 3</u> <u>BTEC advanced GNVQ</u> <u>Vocational foundation</u> </td> <td> <p>Now</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NVQ level 2 FMA AMA General </td> </tr> </table>	<p>5 Years Ago</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>NVQ level 2 (2)</u> <u>NVQ level 3</u> <u>BTEC advanced GNVQ</u> <u>Vocational foundation</u> 	<p>Now</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NVQ level 2 FMA AMA General
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<p style="text-align: center;">Merton College - Tourism & Hospitality</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td> <p>5 Years ago</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>NVQ level 1 (2)</u> NVQ level 2 (1) NVQ level 3 (1) <u>BTEC intermediate GNVQ (1)</u> <u>BTEC advanced GNVQ (2)</u> <u>C&G international certificate (1)</u> </td> <td> <p>Now</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NVQ level 1 (1) NVQ level 2 (4) NVQ level 3 (1) AVCE (1) BTEC first diploma (1) Foundation certificate (1) </td> </tr> </table>	<p>5 Years ago</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>NVQ level 1 (2)</u> NVQ level 2 (1) NVQ level 3 (1) <u>BTEC intermediate GNVQ (1)</u> <u>BTEC advanced GNVQ (2)</u> <u>C&G international certificate (1)</u> 	<p>Now</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NVQ level 1 (1) NVQ level 2 (4) NVQ level 3 (1) AVCE (1) BTEC first diploma (1) Foundation certificate (1) 	<p style="text-align: center;">College of North West London - Health & Social Care</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td> <p>5 Years ago</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access (1) Foundation GNVQ (1) Intermediate GNVQ (1) <u>Advanced GNVQ (1)</u> BTEC diploma (1) <u>HNC (1)</u> </td> <td> <p>Now</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access (1) Foundation GNVQ (1) Intermediate GNVQ (1) BTEC certificate (1) BTEC diploma (1) General (1) OCN (1) </td> </tr> </table>	<p>5 Years ago</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access (1) Foundation GNVQ (1) Intermediate GNVQ (1) <u>Advanced GNVQ (1)</u> BTEC diploma (1) <u>HNC (1)</u> 	<p>Now</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access (1) Foundation GNVQ (1) Intermediate GNVQ (1) BTEC certificate (1) BTEC diploma (1) General (1) OCN (1)
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<p style="text-align: center;">Lambeth College - Life Sciences</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td> <p>5 Years ago</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> BTEC national diploma (1) BTEC HND/HNC (1) </td> <td> <p>Now</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> BTEC national diploma (1) BTEC HNC (1) BTEC professional development certificate (1) </td> </tr> </table>	<p>5 Years ago</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> BTEC national diploma (1) BTEC HND/HNC (1) 	<p>Now</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> BTEC national diploma (1) BTEC HNC (1) BTEC professional development certificate (1) 	<p style="text-align: center;">Barnet College - New Media</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td> <p>5 Years ago</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General (7) BTEC GNQ intermediate (1) <u>BTEC GNVQ advanced (1)</u> BTEC HNC (1) <u>BTEC national diploma (1)</u> BTEC HND (1) <u>Modular access (1)</u> </td> <td> <p>Now</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General (22) BTEC GNVQ intermediate (1) AVCE (1) HNC/HND (3) Foundation degree (1) AS level (1) </td> </tr> </table>	<p>5 Years ago</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General (7) BTEC GNQ intermediate (1) <u>BTEC GNVQ advanced (1)</u> BTEC HNC (1) <u>BTEC national diploma (1)</u> BTEC HND (1) <u>Modular access (1)</u> 	<p>Now</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General (22) BTEC GNVQ intermediate (1) AVCE (1) HNC/HND (3) Foundation degree (1) AS level (1)
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Why changes have taken place to provision

- 3.7 Of key interest for the current study are the reasons why providers had made changes to their provision, and the extent that they had been motivated by better meeting employer (skill) needs.
- 3.8 Broadly there were three key factors driving change, cited spontaneously:
- Changes instigated to better meet learner needs
 - Changes introduced to better meet the needs of the sector
 - Those simply reflecting changes in the qualification frameworks.
- 3.9 The reasons given tended to vary depending on the changes made. Better meeting learner needs, for example, tended to apply to more flexibility in provision (more evening and weekend provision), putting courses on at a wider range of levels and increased support for learners, including more support for those with numeracy and literacy difficulties.
- 3.10 Changes that were often presented as a way of better meeting the needs of the sector included a wider range of courses being offered (hence being more able to meet an employer's needs), more bespoke courses for individual employers and the content of courses changing to meet the needs of the sector.
- 3.11 These motivations for change were often mentioned in combination. However, even where not, it was clear that the factors were usually seen to be closely inter-related. In providing courses better suited to the needs of learners, for example, (this was often raised in relation to greater flexibility of course delivery) then this was seen as indirectly serving the needs of the sector by increasing the numbers starting and also completing training. Offering a wider range of courses was seen as appealing both to learners and to employers.

- 3.12 Another strong theme among providers was the view that in altering provision to meet changes in the occupational frameworks, they were indirectly meeting the needs of the sector. This was because of the requirement for awarding bodies when reviewing occupational standards to consult with the sector.

“Because employers are involved in developing initial NVQs, that is the main extent of our adapting to employer skill needs. We recreate what our employers say are important.”

[construction provider]

- 3.13 In some cases the changes to qualifications was directly explained in terms of better meeting employer needs. For example, Bromley College, who deliver electrotechnical courses, said the demise of the City and Guilds 2360 (and its replacement by the Certificate of Electrotechnical Technology 2330) was largely a result of the view of employers that the courses were being dumbed down.
- 3.14 That said, a number of providers did express doubts as to the extent of these consultation exercises (how well a broad cross-section had been involved) and felt the practice did not match the theory. However, as we discuss in more detail later in the report, providers often take the position that simply by delivering the qualifications laid out by the awarding body they must therefore be meeting the needs of the sector. Some of these providers felt little compunction to collect further information on local employer needs in any systematic way.
- 3.15 Although not all providers explicitly cited better meeting the sector's skill needs as the motivation for change, once the issue was raised with them few providers say this has no role – it is just that for many it is unclear what steps have been taken to understand what precisely these skill needs are.

- 3.16 In a number of specific cases, though, providers made the point of saying that they do not see their provision as being about supplying the sector with candidates who are (almost) job ready and equipped with the skills needed by the sector. This type of response was made a couple of times in the New Media sector where nearly all students wanting to work in the sector go on to Higher Education rather than enter employment. The main reason for this was the surplus of graduate level candidates wanting to work in the sector, and hence the lack of opportunities for those completing Level 2 and 3 qualifications. Another contributing factor is that New Media covers a wide range of job possibilities (animation, editing, video, sound recording, production, etc) and the courses often appear aimed at breadth of coverage to give students tasters of the range of possible options open to them. This acts against providing depth of job-specific skills.
- 3.17 In this context other providers pointed out that an important part of their role was to give learners the underlying theoretical knowledge which will enable them to progress at the job they move into. They saw this as more valuable than just giving them a very specific set of skills needed by employers, especially as these skills can change very rapidly. This was particularly so in the area of IT and the sectors that are very IT dependent (e.g. New Media) where employers and often the learners are keen for training in the use of one specific package.
- 3.18 One other interesting point is that most respondents describe the process of amending provision as involving heads and staff discussing the course over the last 12 months, assessing how things could be improved and submitting plans reviewed by college decision makers. While better meeting employer needs is often part of the decision-making process for revising plans, most heads suggest that the final decision on whether to implement these plans comes down to 'what will demand be – is there evidence that a new course will be filled?' and 'what will it cost and is this justified?' Hence the final decision making is little directly to do with better meeting employer skill needs (though some might argue if a course better meets the sector's needs then it is more likely to be popular).

Reasons for lack of change

- 3.19 A few providers indicated that relatively little change had taken place in their provision over the last five years. In most cases this was a consequence of not feeling change was needed rather than any obstacles preventing change.
- 3.20 In some cases the 'no need for change' sentiment was expressed simply in terms of the qualification framework within that occupation not having changed in the last five years. This attitude was typical of providers who were very qualification / framework-led. Others, though, felt that their courses did not require change because they were 'doing well' or, specifically in relation to skills, that the key, hard skills required in the occupation had not really changed.
- 3.21 The one example we encountered of a provider citing some barriers to change (several major upheavals within the college) also indicated that the graphic design course had only been running for three years, and was still broadly 'bedding down'. Hence even here the implication was that there was little desire to change the range or content of provision.
- 3.22 The cost of altering provision, for example of putting on new courses, was not explicitly mentioned as a factor in the context of changes not being made to provision. It was mentioned by providers as a (often the) key factor considered by the college / provider once suggestions for change had been proposed by heads of department, and there were often cases where specific changes had not taken place because of financial constraints or concerns. Tailored courses for specific employers were often not being delivered because the costs could not be justified.

4 Planned changes for provision over the next few years

4.1 In this chapter we look at planned changes in provision for the coming few years, again with a view to seeing the extent and rate by which providers are adapting provision, and the motivations for their doing so (i.e. to what extent is it about better meeting the skill needs of the sector).

4.2 Most providers had changes planned for the coming few years, and the range and extent of these changes were similar to those providers described as taking place during the past five years. Examples of more substantive changes included:

- Dropping some courses / qualifications and adding others:
 - Thames Valley University was dropping a GNVQ Advanced course and replacing this with a BTEC National Diploma
 - within electrical installation and gas fitting a move away from City and Guilds and into NVQs and technical certificates
 - one childcare CoVE aimed to provide a wider range of subjects for study (playwork, classroom assistants, and childminding specifically will be added), but also trying to put on more courses for Continuing Professional Development.
- More short courses and taster courses being put on, as well as putting more effort into marketing the potential for bespoke courses for employers.
- Increased flexibility in the delivery of courses was a common theme.
- Changes in course delivery with:
 - more delivery of learning in the workplace and the need for more on-site assessment (and hence assessors)
 - more emphasis on technology and on-line delivery (this is also in response to the increased need for IT knowledge in most sectors). This even included in one case an increased use of video conferencing for lectures so that experts from further afield could be used, and money saved.
- One department had just been given COVE status, and one of the direct impacts of this was the need for much greater employer liaison. To this end, they were fully anticipating setting up customised training packages and holding conferences to try and get underneath the skill needs of local employers.
- Some simply said that they knew technology or techniques used within the sector would change in the next five years (for example in beauty where new treatments are continually coming into vogue), and they would respond to it if at all possible.
- Several providers said a push would be to improve literacy and numeracy due to continuing poor standards and employer comments about this, so they would be providing extra support or resources for this.

- 4.3 Unitisation, piloted within the catering department at Westminster Kingsway College in response to employer feedback, is likely to be fully introduced in 2007 which will allow for much more tailored courses and hopefully encourage both employers and students to persevere with the NVQ system. This is a way of selecting relevant course components for study and creating a qualification of one's own from within the qualification structure.
- 4.4 There are some job areas that are being remodelled, and course providers are hoping to be able to respond to this quickly and make their courses fit the new occupational requirements. For example, some childcare roles are being re-modelled. The idea behind this is to give teachers working in childcare the maximum time for teaching by passing the administrative roles to support staff, and to this end three different levels of nursery / classroom assistant are being developed. A similar thing is being done within the NHS to allow those who do have specific skills within skills shortage jobs to focus on them alone, passing any other work to other staff members (radiography is an example of this, so assistants in this area may have new roles). Providers are aware of these developments and ready to set provision which responds to changing needs.
- 4.5 Similarly, Ealing, Hammersmith & West London College spoke of trying to respond to the increased need for staff members to be trained in Braille, sign language and Makaton. In offering this one assumes the college leavers will be better equipped to deal with children with additional needs because they can fill this employer need.
- 4.6 Some colleges were involved in helping to develop Foundation Degrees. This involved developing 'follow on' courses to help people onto the degree course, and had increased liaisons with employers as part of the process of formulating these new courses. This also led to increased links with Universities in most cases.
- 4.7 Increased team working with other colleges was a priority for some colleges, the best example of this being within the health sector. The need for team working has come about partly because employers within the sector are interested in working with colleges and obtaining training, but do not necessarily want to work on a college-specific basis. Therefore the collaboration of colleges can ensure that the right training is available in the right area, and offer a level of flexibility and uniformity that would be harder to provide in isolation.

- 4.8 Planned changes were broadly in the context of meeting the needs of their sector, but rarely as a result of specific activity providers had undertaken which had identified a precise need. More specific and primary prompts were the need to meet government guidelines and changes in the qualification frameworks.
- 4.9 Within construction particularly, there were signs that specific skill needs had been identified within certain occupations, and providers spoke of the desire to meet skills shortages they knew were on the horizon. One provider favoured a 'quick-fix solution' such as certificated 12-week courses whilst another spoke of his intention simply to provide as many courses as possible, and fill them to capacity, to prepare East London for the construction needs of the 'Stratford City 2006' developments.
- 4.10 One example of meeting government guidelines is the need in industries such as care and beauty to get their workforces qualified to specific levels within specific timeframes (e.g. in children's homes, 80% of all care staff must have completed the Caring for Children and Young People Level 3 NVQ by 2005). One construction provider has set targets on Level 3 numbers and is therefore altering provision to try and drive the increase of these numbers.
- 4.11 Another example was a construction provider planning to attract more women into construction as a response to a government initiative. Although this is likely to benefit the construction industry, it is clearly not directly a response to a specific need that the college has identified among local employers.
- 4.12 Awarding bodies had changes planned that obviously would affect what providers offer. Several providers mentioned that the only changes they had planned were in response to changes in qualifications coming from their Awarding bodies. These bodies certainly do anticipate changes in the coming years which cover the same areas that providers themselves mentioned, such as:
- Introduction of more IT, both as a means of delivery (e-learning) and part of the curriculum
 - Single unit accreditation
 - Increased harmonisation by trying to increase the degree of similarity between qualifications at the same level across different sectors
 - Smaller changes to make courses conform as much as possible with newly developed occupational standards.

5 How well provision meets employer skill needs

- 5.1 A core objective of this research project was to assess how well current provision meets the needs of employers. This is because if employers feel that local provision, at Levels 2 and 3, as well as for upskilling of existing employees, meets their needs, then it doesn't matter if providers and employers do not communicate at all. If, on the other hand, there are clear differences between provider and employer views on the appropriateness of provision then clearly issues to do with the means for obtaining sector views become much more primary.
- 5.2 In this chapter we examine how well providers feel their offer meets the needs of the sector, their reasons for these views, and then compare this against the views of employers themselves. We also examine the issue from the views of sector skills councils and trade bodies, and of recruitment-related organisations.

Provider views on how well their provision meets employer needs

- 5.3 Perhaps not surprisingly providers tended to feel they were doing a good job of meeting employer needs. The few exceptions were those who did not see it as a core part of their work to be doing this because their focus was on preparing learners for HE and those who admitted their engagement with the sector was very limited.
- 5.4 The evidence given by providers explaining why they felt their provision was meeting the needs of the sector well varied, with some citing examples of positive employer feedback, or particular achievement (students winning competitions etc), but most relying on evidence such as good completion rates, that the majority of students find work very easily, employers tend to return to them year on year and the absence of any direct criticism. Certainly most providers do not seek employer or sector views in any systematic ways to gather information on employer skill needs nor how their provision is performing in relation to these needs. Very few for example, indicated that they involved employers in discussions about future provision.
- 5.5 Others felt that as they are delivering the course as laid down by the awarding body it should by definition be meeting employer needs, given that employers play a considerable part (in theory at least) in agreeing the framework of vocational qualifications.

- 5.6 Amongst the problems providers recognised, basic skills was one that some picked up as being a continued area for attention. Across providers in general increased work and support in this area has become a growing part of what they aim to deliver, but it is challenging when working to tackle literacy and numeracy problems that schools have failed to sort out in 12 years of education.
- 5.7 Some of the providers who were most confident that they were delivering provision that would fit employer needs were those who have in-house outlets, for example the catering courses who have on-site, student-run restaurants, and beauty therapy courses where pupils put their skills into practice in a salon on the premises. Because the course manager is essentially taking on the employer role here it makes sense that they would have a thorough insight into the real business environment. One beauty college is actually approached by its trade body for input into employer skill needs as it runs a salon on site and is seen to have a firm grasp on the needs of an employer as a result of this.

Barriers to making courses more tailored to employer needs

- 5.8 While providers generally felt they were delivering the skills needed by their sector, there were a number of barriers widely identified which prevent them from delivering courses which are more tailored than at present to employer needs. The key barriers mentioned by providers were the following:
- Having to operate within the very prescriptive qualification framework and the view that there is very little opportunity within the qualifications to adapt provision to meet the needs of an individual employer (or employers in general)
 - Funding not being geared to delivering bespoke provision
 - The cost of putting on bespoke provision, or rather the need for sufficient numbers to make tailor-made provision worthwhile
 - For some, the difficulty in getting information on exactly what employer needs are

- 5.9 The first of the above list was by far the most common response. Examples of the types of comment made are given below:

“The NVQ is under funded and the qualification framework is very rigid and there are no means by which the course could be tailored.”

[Hospitality Provider]

“The difficulty is always fitting the need into the framework.”

[Construction Provider]

“We have to go through so many different bodies to get a course customised that it’s practically impossible.”

[Construction Provider]

“Some industry members would like us to go deeper, but frameworks won’t allow it. We can’t (adapt provision to employer needs), we have to follow the curriculum set down by the awarding bodies.”

[Bromley College - Construction]

- 5.10 The second and third points are closely related. Most employers wanting something bespoke would have a particular skill need in mind and are not looking for any qualification to come out of it. Just one example of many, actually from a situation where the college did put this course on, was an employer working at Wembley Stadium wanting a short training course for the staff in working with a particular type of cladding. Funding is tied to delivering qualifications hence, for an FE college to put on a bespoke course that is not delivering a qualification, this requires full cost recovery. This is possible for a large employer wanting to put relatively large numbers through the provision, but for smaller employers this is very unlikely to be justifiable.

- 5.11 We have discussed some of the key reasons providers give as to the difficulties they have undertaking more tailoring of provision to the sector or to specific employer needs. These tended to be obstacles they faced where they would be interested in providing provision more closely linked to sector needs. For others, it was clear that this was not a primary concern. Some were thinking about putting on bespoke courses though others were thinking more generally. Themes in this area included:

- The mentality that providers are (primarily) there to deliver the qualification laid out by the awarding body: *'we don't see ourselves as being about putting on tailored, employer-specific training. The NVQ is supposed in theory at least to be employer-led.'* [construction provider]
- Courses being very full currently and hence not feeling the need to go and market the potential for bespoke courses
- Related to this, many not having the tutors to deliver additional or extra courses.

5.12 Some providers however, had tried to take steps to make the courses more tailored to employer needs, despite the various obstacles to doing so. Examples included:

Childcare provider

- They fear that Cache programmes do not give a holistic view of care and can even stifle development of personal skills and employability
- They try to deliver the things that do not just focus on competence and skills, and have received good feedback that students put what they have learned at college into practice in an effective way in the workplace and make a positive contribution.

Construction provider

- They 'beef up' the key skills side as that seems to be what employers want
- Try to tailor practical work around what employers have said is important to them, for example, for Carpentry and Joinery fitted kitchens are emphasised at the moment
- Another construction provider told us that they fit the provision laid out in the qualification to the London building market by gaining local sponsorship to buy or even just demonstrate portable power tools and spray plastering machines (which are increasingly used in the trade) and pay special attention to work on older buildings as within London this is the most common type of work performed.

Beauty provider

- Feels that the needs of London differ from those nationally and therefore feels the qualification does not cater for the local market as well as it could
- They provide Open Access facilities for students to do their own independent learning and build on their skills
- Provide simulated salons which are geared towards London's specific needs and try to allow access to some of the latest equipment not covered in the course format (things like lasers or other expensive but commonly used equipment, are brought in and explained by Associate lecturers who work in the industry)
- Also students are invited to try and sell the products within the in-house salon, as this is a necessary part of the job, although not covered by the course.

5.13 In these ways some providers feel that the training they supply enriches the courses laid out by the awarding bodies, with the goal of delivering learners off the course well-equipped with the skills, competencies and attitudes employers need.

Views of employers on the suitability of provision

5.14 Clearly crucial in an assessment of how well providers are delivering students who have the skills needed by the sector are the views of employers themselves.

5.15 There was a fairly wide spectrum of views from employers, from those praising the responsiveness and adaptability of providers to those critical of the skills of people coming off FE provision. Criticisms were occasionally on sector-specific skills issues, but were more often about **generic, soft skills lacking** in those coming from provision. This particularly applied to communication skills, team working, the ability to follow instructions and attitude. **Basic skills of numeracy and literacy** also remain a continued area of concern. There was also felt to be a lack of **commercial awareness** which some employers thought could be given higher priority on provision. Examples included:

- The need to sell on products to customers in the beauty sector
- The critical importance of meeting client deadlines in New Media
- The need for many of those working as fitness instructors or as childminders to work on a self-employed basis (in this sector many felt those coming off provision were not at all prepared for what this would involve).

- 5.16 Providers were generally well aware of issues to do with basic skills and the importance placed on generic, soft skills. There was less sign that they were aware of issues to do with a lack of commercial awareness.
- 5.17 As stated there were instances where criticisms were made which were related to job-specific skills. These are described in more detail in the next chapter, but where these criticisms were made they relate to the ability to perform key skills in that area of work. Examples included basic carpentry, basic cooking techniques and the ability to write an exercise programme. Some providers were certainly aware of this criticism and had responded by concentrating more on equipping students with the fundamentals (Thames Valley University - hospitality).
- 5.18 Comments on the suitability of provision covered not just content and the range of courses but also the timing. Though there was a general feeling that flexibility had improved over recent years, some still felt it failed to reflect their needs:

'They lag behind in understanding the business they are supposed to be helping. We work 24/7 whereas they only open 9-4 in term time and not at all in the summer when the higher market hotels are quieter and could send people on training. Very few courses suit a shift pattern' [A hotel]

Trade bodies and Sector Skills Council (SSCs)

- 5.19 Trade bodies and SSCs were generally positive about the quality of provision in terms of it meeting the needs of the sector, holding that while improvements were needed these were generally about 'tweaks' rather than whole scale change. Evidence came through anecdotal evidence from employers or from employers involved in various bodies on which these trade bodies sat, to an absence of problems being reported.
- 5.20 Within this broadly positive picture, there was often felt to be quite wide differences across providers as to how successfully they were engaging with employers. Generally COVEs were seen to be doing better in this regard, though others questioned how COVEs had been selected and felt their involvement in this process would have been beneficial.
- 5.21 There was a feeling that the FE sector was typically rather slow moving, so that by the time some development had occurred within the industry it could well be two to three years before this had led to specific changes in provision.

- 5.22 There was also a feeling expressed by some SSCs that FE was much more comfortable teaching within the four walls of the college than going out to deliver training on site, which was often the way employers wanted training delivered (construction was one example cited). In fact this view was confirmed by some providers themselves, this in regard to the increased problems in teaching workers on site where there will be a wide range of age, experience, skills and abilities compared with teaching a cohort in college, and also the expense of on-site assessment.
- 5.23 In a similar way, there was a feeling that providers still tended to think in terms of fixed start date, weekday 9am to 5pm hours of operating. Flexibility around timings of provision, while improving, had some way to go.
- 5.24 Another criticism made was that there is plenty of information available on skills needs within the sector but that providers do not always make best use of this information. That said, it appeared in some cases that this information was in the hands of the organisation being interviewed and it was not clear how widely distributed this information had been. As we see later in the report, few providers indicated that they regularly received reports on skill needs and those that did commented that the reports were often not at the level of detail required to be actionable.

Views of recruitment organisations on the suitability of provision

- 5.25 Amongst the Jobcentre Plus, Connexions and private recruitment agencies we spoke to, there was a widespread feeling that many FE leavers were not job ready or as job ready as employers would like, although the skills gaps were by and large in regard to soft skills. One construction recruitment agency told us:

“It’s not the skills that are lacking but capability. They know how to do the job but can not do it fast or well enough.”

Another agency summed up the problem by saying:

“They need to know HOW to do it, WHAT to do is not enough!” (The Sportsweb – recruitment agency for beauty and fitness roles)

- 5.26 Few hard skills were identified as lacking but one New Media recruitment agency suggested that the artistic side of graphic and web design was sometimes neglected in favour of IT skills.

- 5.27 Sales skills were a common need, not solely for retail, and beauty/fitness but across most job roles, and hence it was felt important that students could show they could 'sell' themselves to employers at interview. A number of comments indicated that many were unable to demonstrate this and lacked good interview skills. Childcare and retail recruiters identified this weakness particularly strongly.
- 5.28 Another widespread comment was that employers in some sectors often do not even want to consider FE recruits because of their perceived lack of experience. Many recruitment agencies admitted to dealing with only a tiny minority of FE leaver applicants because the level of jobs that are lucrative for an agency to recruit require either more experience or more qualifications than these candidates typically have. Experience was seen as vital for childcare, beauty and fitness roles, and new media roles, and highly desirable amongst the other occupational areas. The only solution to the experience issue appears to be for providers to attempt to maximise the time spent on work placements and in real work environments (though many providers indicated how difficult it was to get employer co-operation). It also needs to be emphasised to students how important work experience in the sector, even short unpaid stints of holiday work, can be to help gain employment.
- 5.29 Another common general comment was a perceived lack of understanding about how business functions and the commercial pressures which employers operate within. This was felt to be an area that providers could improve on and increased work experience would help towards developing this understanding.
- 5.30 An example of positive feedback from recruitment agencies was in regard to the London College of Fashion. The role of a beauty therapist in most environments requires a fair level of product specific knowledge and that the London College of Fashion is especially good at this as they train students in how to carry out the treatments offered by the various beauty houses. This makes them more employable and hopefully gears them towards the working environment.

Views of awarding bodies

- 5.31 Three interviews were conducted with awarding bodies. None felt able to speak with confidence about providers specifically in the London area. There was sympathy though, about the difficulty of engaging with employers in order to obtain their views on skill needs and qualifications, given that this is something they are required to show to QCA when proposing revised or new qualifications.

- 5.32 One awarding body we spoke to said that overall providers have a good understanding of employer needs at ground level, mainly because most have come to teaching directly from the sector and because so many continue to work part time in the field. Of more concern was a feeling that teaching quality may be suffering because of a difficulty in attracting those from within the sector with breadth of experience and specialist knowledge. This difficulty was seen as mainly stemming from lower salaries (and fewer benefits) being on offer for those in FE compared with working in the sector. Hence the skills gap of most immediate concern for this respondent was not of students leaving courses in relation to what employers need, but actually among the teaching staff within FE themselves.
- 5.33 We have already commented that some providers feel that by delivering a course approved by the awarding body then they must therefore be meeting the needs of the sector, since the awarding bodies have to show they have consulted with employers. Awarding body respondents felt while this argument had some validity (and that they did make great effort to consult with the sector and needed to prove this to QCA). However, it was important to appreciate that QCA approve a qualification for usually four years, and that towards the end of this time there is no guarantee the qualification remains completely up to date. This is especially the case in fast changing sectors (childcare is a good example of this given the extensive recent legislative changes affecting the industry).

6 The level of understanding providers have of skill needs within occupational area

- 6.1 We have looked at the extent to which providers feel their provision meets the (skill) needs of the sector, and how this compares with the views of employers and trade bodies and SSCs. In this chapter we look specifically at the skills which are seen as key, comparing the skills providers say are important within each occupational area against what employers say are important. The aim here is to see the extent to which providers and employers' views tally. Clearly if there is little disparity then it can be assumed that the mechanism or processes by which providers collect information on employer skill needs are broadly working effectively.
- 6.2 In the following analysis we run through comparisons of what providers and employers say are the key skills needed in some of the sectors and occupations covered in the research. It should be noted that we have tried to concentrate on the technical skills that are felt to be required rather than the soft skills, though in all sectors both employers and providers continually emphasised the importance of soft skills. Employers, for example, are often most critical of FE leavers deficiencies in attitude or communication skills.

Construction

- 6.3 Within construction we investigated carpentry and joinery, gas fitting and electrical installation (most interviews with providers and employers covered the first of these, so we have concentrated on this area). Carpentry and joinery was not seen as an area where skill needs had changed significantly over the last five years. The basic requirement remains to be able to make a joint, hang a door, roof work, etc. In fact, making a joint is becoming less central with the growth of pre-fabrication (something recognised by providers and employers alike), with providers pointing out greater time is spent on such areas as installing fitted kitchens. Some employers felt that the quality of benchwork skills had deteriorated because of the push to greater pre-fabrication, though providers indicated benchwork skills were still a core part of their provision.
- 6.4 One other change identified was a push to greater use of saws and other portable equipment on site, and hence the need to train people on this equipment.

- 6.5 Criticisms made by employers in relation to the skills of those coming off FE courses related much more to soft skills (attitude and willingness to work) than to any technical skills.
- 6.6 In some of the other trades, there was a similar closeness of fit between employers and providers. For gas fitting both recognised that the testing equipment used by gas fitters is more technical now than ever before and there is an increased need for understanding of gas regulations that have changed to bring the UK more in to line with Europe. Safety procedure awareness remains key.
- 6.7 In electrical installation the key development has been the move to an increased emphasis on electronics, again recognised by employers and providers alike.

Childcare and early years

- 6.8 The key job-specific skills listed by providers covered knowledge of child development, dealing with paperwork and report writing, assessing needs based on observation, health and safety, knowledge of child protection regulations, discipline procedures and awareness of special needs policies. There was a general theme expressed that the early years sector had started to become much more professional over the last 5 years or so and this had affected all aspects of the training required. Needing to keep abreast of legislation and government policy was one particular key aspect.
- 6.9 Providers identified a wider range of hard skills than employers, who tended to focus very much on soft skills in terms of what they are looking for when employing someone as a nursery nurse or childminder (providers also see these as being key to progressing in the occupation). A very long list of items was mentioned covering communication, empathy with children, team work, reliability, self-motivated and others.
- 6.10 Key attributes required tended to match with regard to soft skills. However, some employers and recruiters expressed disappointment at candidates' poor interview technique and low confidence, resulting in weak communication skills. Communication is critical given the need to be able to be confident and articulate in front of parents and children and this seemed to be something that providers were largely unaware of.

- 6.11 Employees with good literacy and numeracy skills were seen by some employers as hard to recruit and was acknowledged as an issue amongst providers. Although some providers seemed at a bit of a loss as to how to address the problem (*'Sometimes they can barely write their name and address!' – private provider*).
- 6.12 Manual handling ability was required by one employer who felt this skill was not covered by the current courses.
- 6.13 Trade bodies identified a lack of underpinning knowledge in training provision and also that basic skills could be a problem, although their feeling was that providers were aware of this and responding to it.

Hospitality

- 6.14 In this sector we covered chefs and front of house roles.
- 6.15 This was a sector where it is very clear that providers are heavily involved in the industry and they see themselves not so much as educationalists serving the industry but as part of the industry itself. Key skills for chefs were described as being knife skills, food preparation skills and knowledge of key cooking techniques, but equally important were enthusiasm for food, motivation, good attitude, team work and an ability/willingness to work unsocial hours. The essential skills were seen as relatively unchanging, though over the last few years there has been increased emphasis on:
- The need for more multiskilling (less specialisation, based on employers wanting chefs to be able to turn their hand to any cuisine)
 - Knowledge of organic foods and how they are produced
 - The trend towards using seasonal foods
 - Presentation skills with the need for an element of showmanship (more cooking being done in front of the customer)
 - A continuing push to more fusion cooking and the need for more creativity in putting together menus
 - In contract catering, emphasis on portion control and cost, as well as more use of frozen and prepared foods.

- 6.16 If anything, there was a wider range of specific skills mentioned by providers than by employers, although the essentials for employers were knife skills, pastry skills, basic kitchen techniques, food hygiene and knowledge of ingredients. Employers felt that the hardest skills to find in new recruits were commercial awareness and customer service, along with soft skills such as communication and listening effectively. It was also felt courses could cater to the international market more effectively, with stronger awareness of different cultures and cuisines:

'Practical skills could still be emphasised more, also needs a more international focus and awareness of different cultures built in' (A Hotel)

'Customer care, being able to effectively deal with people, politeness, changing bookings, deal with table settings etc' (Eat Out for Fun – Restaurant)

- 6.17 One employer criticised courses for trying to cover too broad a spectrum of skills, which could be supported by this identification of such wide-ranging needs. Hospitality Training Foundation (HTF), the aspirant Sector Skills Council for Hospitality, Leisure, Travel and Tourism, also had evidence based on a *nationwide* study that key skills such as sauce making and fish filleting were below the required standard.

- 6.18 However, this LSC study suggests that providers had started to respond to this and one provider specifically mentioned that they had switched back to a greater concentration on basic cooking skills in response to employers and industry comment that too many people were finishing courses without some key basic cooking techniques.

- 6.19 As a sector there was some criticism over course delivery times and lack of flexibility, but overall it was felt that employers are positive about hard skills covered. A recruitment agent commented:

'Colleges do very well on the whole and are aware of the skills employers want. However, the hospitality industry is not just about skills, personality and attitude is just as, if not more, important. You can't really teach these.'

- 6.20 Trade bodies had relatively little comment on the actual skills being delivered (notwithstanding the comment on key skills above), but did feel there was a lack of courses in London. One consequence was the increasing trend to recruit from Eastern Europe. One trade body also identified a lack of upskilling courses that has led to larger companies providing only in-house training and smaller ones to fall behind with continuing professional development. The lack of such courses was put down to funding rather than provider fault.

Retail

- 6.21 Soft skills and having the right attitude and commitment were the main requirements of employers in the sector and apart from a slight feeling that customer service could be covered more thoroughly, it was very difficult to engage retail employers in detailed discussion about technical skills. Perhaps one of the key difficulties with this occupational area is the lack of identification (from any respondent group) of any hard skills (either needed or lacking).
- 6.22 That said, problem solving, planning and competence in dealing with difficult situations were mentioned by one employer as hard to find amongst recruits. None of the providers specifically mentioned these skills.
- 6.23 Some providers saw flexibility as of key importance, as they felt supervisors and managers had an increasingly fluid job role. Employers themselves did not specifically allude to this, though this may in part explain difficulties listing any key job specific hard skill needs.
- 6.24 One employer mentioned that one college from which he had recruited offered training on the legal side of the retail industry, that he had found valuable. [A pharmacy]
- 6.25 Selling skills were mentioned as key by only one employer and a few providers. Providers and employers alike clearly saw sales as an integral part of customer service and focussed on this rather than actual selling techniques (either on the shop floor or within a sales and marketing role).

- 6.26 Providers recognised that customer care is growing in importance as the sector becomes more competitive and the public more demanding, but few identified gaps in the provision of the required skill set. A Jobcentre Plus contact commented that the providers who put particular emphasis on customer service tend to produce better candidates for the job market. Other recruiters noticed the need for customer service skills and one commented that the demand for these skills was one of the main reasons some employers insist that they will only recruit those with experience. Providing learners with work experience is probably an area where providers need to do more.

New Media and Creative

- 6.27 Here the occupations covered were web design, video/film production and graphic design. Clearly this is a broad area, and certainly video and film production covers a wide range of specific jobs. Partly for this reason, employers in the New Media sector mentioned a wide range of specific skill needs including: the ability to master technical equipment, basic production skills, quality checking, knowledge of applications, experience with cascading style sheets, brand awareness and working within commercial identities, commercial awareness and understanding of how to contribute to the profitability of a small business, an understanding of usability and accessibility and the ability to work across multiple platforms including mobile and television.
- 6.28 Providers seemed aware of some, but by no means all, the skills needs, though this may reflect the niche area employers often work in.
- 6.29 A number of employers indicated that they felt provision met their needs poorly and failed to provide the technical skills they sought. Software skills, a key area for many, did not seem to be a problem on the whole, but one employer felt that 'trying to make courses more fun', along with an assumption that people already understand technology, was the cause of a loss of fundamentals and has led to less well prepared leavers. For graphic and web design, artistic skills were needed and one recruiter said that he suspected providers simply do not *'fully understand just how much importance employers place on the quality of a candidate's artwork'*.
- 6.30 Recruitment agencies also reported a downturn in the quality of recruits and told us that FE leavers lack this *'fundamental grounding in artwork'*, leading to the current situation where only graduates are getting jobs within the industry. According to Skillset's 2003 workforce survey, 66% of the audio visual workforce are educated to degree level compared to 16% of the UK workforce as a whole.

- 6.31 We have already commented that providers in this area tend to see their role as preparing students for further study not immediately for the job market. FE providers themselves admitted a poor level of interaction with employers and the industry in general and found it hard to engage employers, possibly a result of employers' preference for recruiting from HE. However, as one organisation said: *'There is a clear perception that few courses offer the right mix of vocational skills to equip students to enter the industry'*.
- 6.32 From the provider angle, two comments could be made. Firstly, they often see the aim of the course as providing tasters in a wide range of areas to allow the learners to get a feel for the specific area they would like to pursue. This does of necessity lead to a broad rather than necessarily a deep coverage of skills. Secondly, specifically in relation to IT skills, providers feel they cannot attempt to keep up with the latest packages and programmes being used by the industry (these are fast changing and varied, but also costly), hence they have to concentrate on the underlying ideas and thinking which are important in the industry. This again means that the aim is not to produce people able to immediately progress to using the packages and programmes that employers are using.

Health and Social Care

- 6.33 Here we covered health care assistants and care home workers. The skills raised by providers as being required by employers focused on both soft skills (particularly team working and communication) and more job-specific areas. The job-specific skills included caring skills, identifying and reporting risks, manual handling ability, basic IT, understanding patients' rights, understanding of machines and how to read data off them, first aid skills (for care home workers) and basic food hygiene. Underpinning knowledge was felt to be necessary as well as practical skills and an example of this was on Merton College's care course where a demonstration of how to feed was backed up with an explanation of the workings of the digestive system.
- 6.34 The skills were largely seen as similar compared to five years ago although there is growing regulation requiring more frequent updating of skills. There is perhaps growing emphasis on the need to understand cultural diversity and good communication skills have become not merely preferable but essential due to the customer service standards the NHS sets itself now. The ability to liaise effectively with other professionals has also grown in importance.

- 6.35 The range of skills described ties in very closely with those which employers say are key. The changes identified by employers as growing in importance over recent years were generally few, though there was mentions of increasing need for basic IT skills and of ward environments being less hierarchical and hence the need for more use of initiative. The general need to keep updating skills to keep in line with changes in regulations was also confirmed.

Fitness and Beauty

- 6.36 Amongst employers of fitness instructors, although soft skills, particularly communication and customer care, are vital, a wide range of technical, job-specific skills were considered key. These included:

- Designing and writing an exercise programme
- Anatomy
- Postural analysis
- Biomechanics knowledge
- Practical application of the theoretical knowledge they should have, such as nutrition
- How to teach and demonstrate effectively (on both a one-on-one basis and in a group).

- 6.37 Nearly all providers recognised the importance of sound knowledge of anatomy and physiology and employers felt this was often well taught. However, a number were criticised over the fact that recruits could not write an effective fitness programme.

“From what I can see the qualifications are not always relevant to the fitness industry and we therefore need to retrain them because they can’t write an exercise programme for an everyday user within a gym environment.” (Leisure Connection – Fitness)

- 6.38 Another criticism was that courses in fitness instruction are too often geared towards training a professional sportsperson on a one-to-one basis, or coaching a football team, whereas the vast majority of leavers will become instructors in a gym environment. Hence some felt courses needed to change their emphasis in this regard.

- 6.39 One general comment was that candidates employers encounter from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa were better trained and more confident with clients than their UK counterparts. This is the standard which employers would like to see matched.

- 6.40 Employers and recruitment agencies alike also felt that more could be done in regard to selling skills, this was seen as important for both fitness and beauty roles:

'Business sense, thinking about revenue, there needs to be more management and more on how to use products. They have a fear of selling which is an important part of the business. Colleges should speak to industry and they would know this.' [A Spa]

- 6.41 The beauty side of the industry identified fewer technical skills lacking after an FE education and focused more on soft skills, though improved selling skills and commercial awareness were raised. This related to the importance for salons to sell products to customers as a key revenue stream. On the whole providers were seen as lacking awareness of the commercial need for sales skills and only one provider had taken action to try and meet the need:

'Students are reluctant to see why they should be selling but we turn it round that they need repeat appointments. We have attempted to bring in products ourselves for students to sell and have workshops and role-plays and things like that' (A Beauty Provider)

Life Sciences

- 6.42 Occupations covered were laboratory technicians and optical and dental technicians.
- 6.43 Within the small and somewhat niche industry of dental technicians, providers were particularly well attuned to employer needs and the only skills employers felt were lacking were soft skills apart from one mention of manual dexterity (although the respondent stressed that it was not a large problem).
- 6.44 In terms of general technicians they were again more often graduate posts, and no hard skills were identified as lacking. The main comment was a lack of awareness of the working world.
- 6.45 Providers mentioned several elements of optical and dental technician roles such as design skills needing to be coupled with good technical ability, understanding of physics and anatomy, awareness of products available and an element of salesmanship in dispensing. The trade body felt the industry relied on FE and that the artisan and craft skills supplied by colleges were of a high standard.

- 6.46 Generally employers felt that the leavers provided were quite well equipped and providers concurred with this.
- 6.47 Demand for technicians was not seen to be high in London (compared to, say, the Midlands), but the market for laboratory technicians was felt to be increasing. Recruitment agencies say employers often want FE candidates for these positions but a shortage of these candidates means employers are often forced to take degree level candidates. This is not usually desirable for employers as the job is relatively basic and not particularly well paid. Hence graduates do not often stay long in the positions. Also graduate candidates often lack the practical and basic laboratory skills that are vital for this role, wet lab skills being a particular weakness.
- 6.48 In this industry where employers are often very small companies, group training associations, which allow trainees to spend time with different employers and therefore gain breadth of experience and complete different areas of their training, allow even employers who are short of resources to participate in the training process.
- 6.49 However one recruitment consultant felt that in fact courses did not produce candidates well equipped for a career as laboratory technicians because they were too broad to really cover the key things employers tend to seek, namely:
- Sound biology and/or physics knowledge
 - Laboratory techniques
 - Use of specific laboratory instruments
 - Preparation of solutions
 - Basic skills such as numeracy, literacy, and communication.
- 6.50 She added however that these criticisms apply to both graduates and FE leavers and in fact she could not recall any negative comment on a college recruit aside from that they can sometimes be 'flaky' and less professional than older candidates.
- 6.51 Training and the need to develop skills once working on the job were considered by all to be a requirement within the industry, particularly necessary due to the huge variety of roles, e.g. the vast range of equipment that can be used and the range of techniques specific to individual employers. Employers seemed to expect this:
- 'We don't have high expectations and give lots of on the job training'. [St Peter's Hospital – Lab Technicians]*

7 The processes and mechanisms used by providers for developing an understanding of occupational skill needs

7.1 In this chapter we look at the processes by which providers collect and gather information on what employer occupational skills needs are. In particular we examine:

- The mechanisms and processes used to acquire this knowledge
- Which of these appear to work best in terms of being the most informative and to have the most impact in stimulating change (giving examples of where information has been used to adapt provision)
- The barriers which providers feel exist to improving their understanding of their industry's needs
- Ways in which these processes could be improved.

The range of mechanisms used by providers

7.2 Most providers indicate that they rely on a range of methods to acquire information on employer skills needs. The main areas that tended to be mentioned were the following:

- Informal contacts, built up over many years working or being an educationalist in the sector
- Open days or events where employers are invited in to the college/provider
- Sitting on industry groups or forums where employers, providers and bodies representing the sector meet
- Having a member of staff in an employer liaison role
- Having teaching staff who work in the sector (or having a number of Visiting Tutors)
- Tutors receiving secondments or a set number of days a year for professional development (which often involves working in the sector)
- Having a 'real', commercial workplace situation on site. Examples included a restaurant and a beauty salon
- Contact with employers when visits are made for assessment purposes
- Information provided by sector bodies

- Information in the trade press (one example was a head of department in catering using this as a source to see which sub-sectors are recruiting most heavily. Recently this has been high in cruise liners and hence some project work tackled issues to do with cooking on liners)
- Information from awarding bodies
- Attending conferences
- Discussions with other providers
- Inviting those working in the industry to 'visit' the course. This was a particular feature of catering courses, many of which had success at getting celebrity chefs
- Having patrons of the course who have worked in the industry for many years
- Asking employers to review forthcoming course prospectuses.

7.3 Providers tended to think of the range of means as providing the understanding of employer needs rather than any one particular mechanism being key. That said, a number of the mechanisms described were felt to be particularly important.

7.4 Those providers with a member of staff with a specific employer engagement role (often a work-based co-ordinator or industry co-ordinator) tended to feel this was a key element for their gaining an understanding of employer needs. Certainly many providers without such a role felt it would be invaluable, since one of the main barriers to deepening the understanding of the skill requirements was simply having the time and resources to go out to employers to discuss these issues. Where the position did exist, then the potential benefits were sometimes diluted when the co-ordinator had to work across a number of sectors served by the college.

7.5 Having tutors working in the sector was relatively common across the sectors with the possible exception of New Media and felt to be a direct means of having access to developments in the sector. Examples included tutors in construction working in the sector at weekends and those in childcare running their own nurseries. At other colleges, there was a policy of encouraging Visiting Tutors (VTs) who worked in the sector. Some respondents implied they would like to do more of this (or to have tutors with more recent experience of work in their industry) but there were real problems finding suitable candidates. In construction, for example, a number of providers spoke of the difficulty of attracting those with experience of construction work and with relevant teaching experience.

- 7.6 Related to this direct work within the sector were the examples where a college had a commercial operation that provided a real, if on-site, environment serving to the public. Examples included a restaurant and a beauty salon. This was felt to be of great benefit in terms of reducing the divide between education and the sector.
- 7.7 The effectiveness and strength of industry forums varied. In some they played a very central role, this was especially so in the Early Years and Health and Social Care areas, where strong links with local authorities or the NHS had been set up. In others they were just starting out e.g. the CITB had recently set up the London Construction Skills Forum.
- 7.8 Overall though there was a general feeling that the informal links with employers were at least as important as more formal processes. For example, a common stimulus to putting on new courses was simply receiving enquiries from employers asking if that provision was available. A specific example was a hospitality provider putting on front of house training on Saturday in response to a number of employers asking why it couldn't be done when there were Saturday courses for chefs.

Mechanisms/processes of which minimal use made

- 7.9 We have discussed in some depth the range of mechanisms used by providers to develop their understanding of sector skill needs. We turn briefly now to those areas that appear not to be used, certainly in any consistent or systematic way.
- 7.10 An omission that stood out from the list of processes and mechanisms was information on employer skills issues obtained via government, LSC or SSC surveys. Only a very few providers reported receiving such reports and none appeared to actively seek them (i.e. by contacting their LSC). Where they had been encountered they were usually described as being at too general a level (i.e. not exactly matching their sector, or results being national, not local) and hence of very limited use. More often the few that had seen such survey results or reports described them as being part of the general background (*'we bear it in mind'* and *'it hasn't led to any changes'*).

- 7.11 Only a tiny minority of providers seek to undertake their own surveys of employer skill needs. Some had tried it and decided it wasn't worth the effort (one reported a response rate of 2% to a postal questionnaire). One exception was a childcare provider that had contacted employers on its books to see what qualifications staff they employed had, and they were planning work in the near future to see what employers wanted from provision.
- 7.12 None of the providers followed up students in any systematic way to assess issues such as the skills they were utilising or the skills they need in their current employment that the course had not equipped them with. The only contact was at a college, not departmental level, and this was usually simply about destination tracking or some overall measure of satisfaction with the course, nothing skill related.
- 7.13 Attempting such a task was felt to be very resource heavy and some added as a barrier that it is a very mobile industry and hence addresses get out of date very quickly. This applied to catering and to construction.
- 7.14 Nor was information from recruitment organisations such as private agencies or Jobcentre Plus being sought, for example as to employer feedback on the skills lacking by candidates. Providers appeared to have no real contact with these organisations. In some sectors this appeared to be because students can find work at the end of the course easily enough without the need to go via recruitment agencies (childcare, construction and fitness and beauty were examples of this). In others (e.g. graphic design and New Media) it was because most go on to higher education.
- 7.15 One other aspect that was perhaps surprising is that very few providers appeared to involve employers in their sector in any review of course provision or discussion of proposed changes. One Hospitality provider mentioned doing this, as did one for its life science provision, but these were the exceptions.

General employer engagement or skills-specific dialogue?

7.16 It should be noted that on further questioning, it was clear that providers were often answering about their general means of engaging employers and that the contact by these mechanisms was rarely, if at all, used to discuss matters specifically relating to skill needs. For example:

- One provider said the sessions where employers were invited in to the college were essentially about trying to 'sell' the appropriateness and quality of their provision, rather than as a vehicle for asking employers about their particular needs
- The same was true of many of the employers and provider meetings - some providers could never recall skills issues as being on the agenda of items to discuss
- Visits to employers for on-site assessment appeared to concentrate almost exclusively on discussions about how the individual was progressing and any difficulties, rather than as a means for a broader discussion of the skill needs of the employer. This certainly appears to be a wasted opportunity.

7.17 Supporting this view that the range of processes/mechanisms described are often more about general employer engagement and developing an understanding of what is happening in the sector rather than skills-specific is that when asked for examples as to how information gained from these different approaches had led to changes, many indicated that the feedback did not really work in this way.

"It hasn't in any systematic way. It's more of a means of keeping on top of things."

"It hasn't been used in this way."

"It's all part of an on-going process."

"Not really at all, the lead comes from the awarding bodies."

7.18 Against this there were examples where information acquired from the various mechanisms had inputted into changing the range of courses, content or delivery. Even here it is apparent that the changes refer to information acquired through the range of approaches rather than being mechanism-specific, again suggesting that a variety of sources is used to input into general feelings about what employer needs are. Examples are given below:

- A few employers had asked why front of house training could not be delivered on Saturdays (as it was for some various chef courses) and the provider decided to provide such training
- Lambeth College's Health and Social Care course changed the way they taught dealing with bodily fluids after feedback from an employer that the way they were working was outmoded
- Thames Valley University's Hospitality course concentrates more on the basics after general feedback from a number of employers that many students could do much of the fancy stuff but lacked the ability to do some of the basics well
- An increased emphasis on providing short upskilling courses was described as resulting from employers indicating that this was their preferred approach to training their staff, rather than block provision.
- The general push to put on more higher level courses (or to put more people through Level 3 provision) was sometimes described as being a result of employers saying they needed more people with higher level skills (though others described this as being government or LSC driven)
- A hospitality provider had put on a 2-year patisserie course once a number of employers had mentioned that such courses were needed and lacking.

How well do providers feel these approaches work

- 7.19 Providers were asked how well they felt they had their 'finger on the pulse' of what occupational skill needs were within in the sector, in effect how well the processes by which they collect information on employer skill needs work.
- 7.20 Most employers felt they had a good understanding of employer skill needs in their sector. This was nearly always from 'indirect' evidence, comments including such things as:
- The same employers keep coming back to us
 - We had a good Ofsted inspection
 - Our students find work in the sector easily enough
 - We know employers rate our training highly
 - We give learners a wide range of skills
 - We follow the NVQ closely
 - We go beyond the requirements.
- 7.21 There is a realisation though that this is an area where more can usually be done and, as discussed in relation to barriers to increasing their understanding, more time and resources to concentrate on this activity (for example having someone specifically charged with developing employer links) would help in this regard.

How well do employers and others feel that they are engaged by providers?

- 7.22 Employer responses were very mixed on this issue. Many felt that providers had made no attempt whatsoever to engage with them, others felt the only efforts were based around trying to 'sell' them training and that providers showed no interest in skills issues, while others were very impressed with the approaches providers had made and were willing to spend time discussing the issues.

- 7.23 A number of employers described colleges or providers seeming to be powerless when views on how training could be amended to better suit their needs were expressed (we have seen already that providers often did feel that within the qualification framework set by the awarding body there was little tailoring that they could do). One employer of gas fitters told us that he:

'...talked to the college about plumbing and told them the course isn't relevant for us as gas fitters don't need plumbing skills. They were sympathetic but not much they could do'

Childcare and hospitality employers reported a similar attitude from their local colleges:

'I told them about the lacking basic skills but they just blame the schools, colleges could still teach them interview skills though!'

'Lack of money is their answer when I ask them to adjust to our skill needs or to focus on a new style of cooking'

- 7.24 On the more positive side, there were several examples where provider efforts had been welcomed, though often there was still more to be done:

'They will send you a letter and you can build a relationship with them, one college asked us to send them a profile of the ideal candidate we would look for and this has been helpful.' [A Health Spa]

'Yes, mainly to try and sell to us but the dialogue is helpful, and they sometimes ask us about skill needs' [Leisure Connection – Fitness Club]

'On an ad hoc basis colleges approach us, [we] have catch up meetings for us to monitor the quality of provision and so they can find out if we need anything else, and we have open discussions when they visit us which we find very useful' [Healthcare]

'Yes but we do 70% of approaching still, the CoVE at Southwark has created a framework for approaches, but this could still be more ongoing and we could get more out of what they can offer' [A Hospital]

'A discussion between the head chef and HR manager with a college we had an apprentice with was really beneficial, and looked at how adequate the training was to our needs. The college are in ongoing touch with us and we give feedback, private providers never do this, they just send out a feedback sheet' [A Restaurant]

'We have regular meetings with the college to advise them on the standard of students, and they are always keen to hear my comments. We have a good relationship with them which I think is very necessary, they know exactly how we work and what we require' [Childcare]

- 7.25 An example where engagement was working well was within life sciences, in the dental area, where a number of employers praised Lambeth College with its specialist Dental Technician courses. In this niche industry the relationship between provider and employers was very close, with employers involved in discussions of course content. One commented:

'We asked Lambeth College to halve the course length to give more day release time - they did.' (Eastmans Dental Hospital – Dental Technicians)

- 7.26 Some sectors seem to be better than others in this, with the retailers we spoke to reporting no approaches on skills needs, whereas the health and beauty sectors were able to provide plenty of examples.

Good Practice for adapting to employer skill needs

- 7.27 Unsurprisingly, the CoVEs proved to be especially good at engaging employers and responding effectively to their skills requirements. Examples where it was clear providers were particularly impressive and responsive were the following:

Technician Courses (Life Sciences)

- In daily telephone contact with employers ('sometimes it's hard to stop them phoning up!')
- Head of department involved in national Dental Technician Association
- Advisory committee within the college meets 3 times a year which consists mainly of employers. A major local employer is the chair of this committee.
- 2 of the 7 tutors work in the industry as well as teach
- Frequent and close contact with qualification bodies Edexcel and BTEC awarding body
- Bi-annual meetings of all 6 UK colleges offering dental technology
- Have advised and contributed towards development of occupational standards.

Thames Valley University – Hospitality Courses

- A large number of local employers on their mailing list (600) – all get sent the prospectus annually
- Member of staff sits on education committee of the Academy of Culinary Arts
- Part time Work Based Coordinator
- Dialogue with Food Development Association
- Patrons of the course who are all currently working in the sector. This includes high profile names
- Ask employers to review each new prospectus and course content
- Invites employers in to ‘Open Evenings’, where celebrity chefs such as Gary Rhodes and Brian Turner demonstrate techniques
- Make a conscious effort to engage with companies of varying profiles – from well known London hotels to national chains to SMEs
- Responded to requests from employers for courses on Saturdays
- Responded to general feedback that there is a need to ensure basic techniques are not overlooked.

Richmond Adult and Community College – Childcare

- All tutors work in the sector (3 actually run their own nurseries)
- Try and go beyond NVQ requirements by embedding IT in all aspects of the courses and at all levels
- Early Years Partnerships are their main means of creating and maintaining close employer links. They encourage qualifying students to use their database of employers who are looking for childcare workers to help them find jobs and employers to find the right person
- Destination tracking to increase understanding of occupational potential of the course
- Extensive work with employers taking placements to gather understanding of skills used and needed.

Construction Provider

- Working with DFES they have tried to use more interactive approaches, including 'board games', to engage students and improve retention rates (may impact on the 'enthusiasm' side that employers feel is weak)
- Tailor courses for employers who do not feel they need a national qualification but something more specific. For example, a UK timber exporter wanted a programme to assess all current staff based on a company standard and a programme to enable new staff to be assessed and trained to that standard
- Have employed someone with specific skills to tackle ongoing employer issues about numeracy and literacy of students
- Setting up an employer/training provider forum in conjunction with LSCs – aiming to have both large and small employers.

Beauty Therapy Provider

- Have amended assessment methods to include employers more and so that major employers come and work with them on assessments. This means that along with a member of academic staff there is an industry based person in the room giving feedback on the student's performance based on industry requirements.

New Media (graphic design) Provider

- Have visiting tutors (on a weekly basis) from a range of sectors within New Media, who are practising professionals involved in the industry in a way full time tutors can not be
- Run a mentoring scheme with the BBC
- Part of West London Media Strategy Group as well as other forums that look at skills shortages in the industry and ways of providing training to meet them.

Southwark College – Health and Social Care

- Try to respond to changes in the NHS including: modernisation, flexibility of location for delivery and more flexible timings to accommodate shift work
- Conducted extensive research with employers as well as desk research into vacancies to try and establish what employer needs are
- Members of South East London Workforce Development Confederation which has given employer contacts and helped build relationships as well as being a forum to discuss training needs and issues
- Worked with Guys and St Thomas' Hospital to establish a set of criteria staff should meet and then provide upskilling training

- Created CD-roms relating to key on-the-job skills and ESOL. Can be undertaken with a tutor (or alone as it has audio support) and provides 36 hours of job specific key skills help and training
- Working to improve all aspects of Advice, Information and Guidance for employers
- Place an emphasis on assembling the right team to engage employers rather than relying on tutors who simply may not have the right expertise.

Processes by which the range, content and delivery of courses are/would be changed

- 7.28 There was quite strong uniformity for the internal processes by which provision would come to be amended by a provider. There is an annual review amongst the head of department and staff about how the course had worked over the last year. If significant change was felt to be required (for example adding courses) then approval of decision makers at the college is required and their criteria were described as being whether a new course would be popular (and the evidence for this), what the costs of putting the new course on would be and then the overall costs and likely income generated. A new course would also need to be approved by the awarding body.
- 7.29 More minor changes could simply be instigated by the head of department without the need for such approval.

Barriers providers feel exist to improving their understanding of industry's needs

7.30 The key barriers which providers say exist to being able to improving their understanding of industry's needs fall under the following headings:

- The limited time to undertake this task and a lack of resource (staff) to undertake this role
- In some cases, the relative unwillingness of employers within the sector to spend time to discuss the issues

7.31 The most common barrier was that undertaking this work was seen as very time intensive and few felt they had the resources to carry out this task to anything approaching the degree they would like.

"We've not tailored it to the West London market, more to what universities want. We've not got time to go out and talk to employers."

[Graphic Design provider – New Media]

7.32 Some providers spoke of the difficulty of building up a dialogue with employers, something that affected different sectors to different degrees. The New Media sector was one where this appeared to be a particular problem, in the main because of the predominance of small, specialist SMEs with little time to get involved with FE colleges. Allied to this was the fact that some local, very large employers (the BBC) appeared relatively disinterested in dialogue with FE when their recruitment is much more graduate orientated. In other sectors too, though, providers described situations where events had been very poorly attended, or where it is the same few employers attending these events or sitting on forums.

Role/potential role of LSC in aiding provider/employer dialogue

7.33 There was a range of responses to our question about the role and potential role of the LSC in improving the flow of information about skills needs between employers and providers, but most saw the LSC role as very much one of facilitating the links and liaising between parties. Some spoke of the need for the LSC to organize the forums and take steps to ensure good attendance.

7.34 A range of the comments made by employers show the varied opinions on what the LSC should be doing but also the general belief in the nature of their role as a mediator and monitor of the relationship:

'They should be active in seeing colleges open a dialogue and creating long-term commitment to it. Colleges need to fill in the knowledge that the NVQ does not give.' [A Hotel]

'The LSC must facilitate the liaison process, help partnerships and improve relationships between provider and employer' [A Retail Employer]

'They have a pivotal role in making sure colleges are delivering stuff that is practical and making colleges accountable' [New Media]

'They could be that contact between employer and provider' [Broadlands Nursing Home - Healthcare]

7.35 Trade bodies nearly all felt LSCs were ideally positioned (given the influence they have over providers via the funding process) to take on the role of bringing providers and employers (and indeed trade bodies) closer together.

7.36 It was also suggested that the funding of workforce development staff within colleges with an employer liaison role could be organized by the LSC and thus they would be helping colleges to develop their employer engagement independently.

8 A Pan-London Employer Guide to Training

8.1 The final part of our discussions with respondents covered the idea of a Pan-London Employer Guide to Training, this put in the context of general ways in which the flow of information from providers to employers could be improved. Key, of course, are the views of employers as to the perceived need for such a guide and the format it might take, though the issue was also raised with providers and trade bodies.

Employer views as to current information about local provision

8.2 The widespread view among employers is that information on the range of provision is there if you want it, but that it takes time to find what you are looking for, it tends to be somewhat piecemeal and provider-specific and while there is information on the range of provision there is much less on what provision is appropriate for whom. (Our sample of employers it should be remembered consisted of those that had dealings with providers, hence it can be assumed that those trying to make decisions about provision for the first time would find it much more difficult).

8.3 Most appeared to be talking in terms of searches on websites, though others used their trade bodies as a source of information on this area and others simply got on the phone.

8.4 Views as to the effectiveness of the current information available tended to differ between large and small employers. Many large employers stated that they had no problems whatsoever accessing the information they needed as they have personnel teams for whom gathering this information forms part of their job role, but that they imagined it was much harder for smaller companies:

'We've got everything we need but I can imagine it [a Guide to training] would be good for SMEs' [Jigsaw Day Nurseries]

8.5 Smaller companies concurred with this and comments included:

'Every now and again we need to find something specific and I have to spend time trying to find it, usually we look on the Internet' [A Primary School]

'I don't get anything [sent], I have to investigate. Usually I go on the Internet or the phone' [A Spa]

'I think I would use it a lot and it could save me a great deal of time in contacting all the different providers' [Nursing and Residential Home]

'I don't have any information - there's no central structure of information. I only find out through word of mouth or looking at websites.' [DGP - New Media Company]

General reaction to the idea of an Employer Guide to Training

8.6 There is predictably a generally favourable view towards a potential employer-guide to training from employers, on the basis that it could or would act to improve the quality and consistency of information available and make the task of finding out about provision less time-consuming. The key question becomes what information is considered important for it to contain and the format that would best serve employers. We look at this later in the chapter, but broadly employers want something concise and focussed, in a clear and consistent format (allowing easy comparisons between different offers).

8.7 Trade bodies/professional organisations were likewise generally favourable to the idea of an employer guide and were especially keen for anything that could deliver improved education to employers as to what modern qualifications are all about (including what somebody with a particular qualification is intended to be able to do). Some urged that it needs to focus on the needs of SMEs, as they were the group who are traditionally poor at undertaking training and who sometimes have not been targeted by providers due to the financial economies of getting larger groups of trainees involved in courses. The Hospitality Training Foundation (HTF) viewed this opportunity to make contact with SME's with enthusiasm:

"SMEs remain a challenge, but this could be used as a tool to engage with them and give them advice on funding and other issues that concern them as a part of it."

8.8 Providers were more sceptical and were often unclear how such a guide might sit alongside their current brochures and website. Some initially assumed a guide might be, in effect, a compilation of all provider brochures (either hard copy or, more likely to make it manageable in size in electronic format searchable by sector or area) and some questioned what use this might be. However, there was a general feeling that if anything served to make it easier for employers to access relevant information then this would also be in the interests of providers.

8.9 Other common reactions from providers included:

- A feeling that more information on provision was not required (there is plenty of this currently) but a guide informing people about the 'meaning' of qualifications, the potential benefits of training and then pointing them to where they could find out more information if required was what was needed
- A worry about how comparisons between providers might be made and that if a guide went in this direction then it might be misleading. This often came on the back of comments about there not being a level playing field (for example, a provider can deliver the course for lower fees but achieve this low price by taking short cuts on assessment).

8.10 Some providers still remained sceptical and questioned if employers would make use of it, felt that the information was already available (the CITB website was described as having all this information for the construction sector), or felt that the costs of compiling such a thing would not be justified.

Key Information for Inclusion

8.11 There was a conflict between the idea of a very minimal guide, laying out in brief headline issues about training in London (and pointing to where more detailed information could be obtained) and on the other hand a comprehensive guide that would be a 'one stop shop'. The latter risks being too large to be useable if it was produced in a hard copy format (even if they were done in sector-specific guides) so most of these respondents were thinking of a searchable on-line database. The two ideas are not completely at variance since many of those favouring the first approach assume the 'minimal' hard copy guide would be supported by a searchable comprehensive database.

8.12 Those favouring the 'minimal' document tend to favour:

- Information about where more detailed information could be obtained (a central database or provider websites)
- Information on the potential benefits of training
- Information explaining more about qualifications and courses - since it is widely accepted that employers are often very confused by the range of qualifications available. A particular issue of interest was in relation to what is appropriate for those who have worked in the industry for long periods of time but who have no or very out of date qualifications.

8.13 As to the more detailed information that employers want access to, responses concentrated on the following:

- Costs of courses and the funding available
- Core details about the course including duration, attendance
- Details about the provider
- Timing of provision and the flexibility for starting provision
- For some, details about the tutors and perhaps even their CVs. And some felt it was important to know what work they had done in industry and in particular how recent this was
- Details of the course objectives, in particular what an employer can expect from someone coming off particular provision (SkillsActive for example, felt the guide would be most useful if it defined for employers the different types of qualification – and whether they are academic or vocational – along with an explanation of the different levels and, again, what each one *means*, in real terms)
- Some wanted evidence of the *tangible* results of courses (e.g. the range of jobs that recent leavers had attained)
- Who the course is aimed at and what provision and level is right for which type and experience of employee
- An explanation of the interconnectedness of qualifications and their levels, especially what the next step, appropriate qualification would be from any other qualification.

Format of the Employer Guide

8.14 The format in which the guide is available will clearly be key to its success, especially to overcome employer inertia and to make it stand out from the vast range of marketing materials most employers receive on a daily basis.

8.15 When first discussing the idea with respondents it was clear that some had initially considered a large and comprehensive tome covering all aspects of provision for that sector in London. On further thought most considered this unlikely to work, simply because it would be so large (and hence unlikely to be used) and it would get out of date very quickly.

8.16 On balance most considered both hard copy and a database would be needed, the former to advertise the latter (though some felt it should offer details about provision), as well as providing supplementary information. One disadvantage of going too far down the electronic route was the fear that this would put off the key target group, namely SMEs, many of whom might not have computers (e.g. small construction employers) or feel confident about searching on-line.

8.17 A brief summary of pros and cons for each format follows:

	Paper-based	Electronic (CD-rom or website)
<i>PROS</i>	<p>Can be kept in the office and referred to easily</p> <p>Some do not have access to computers or cannot use them effectively.</p>	<p>Can be kept completely up to date</p> <p>Easy for all parties involved in training decisions to look at no matter where they are based</p> <p>Can present very precise and relevant details while holding a huge databank that the user does not need to be aware of.</p>
<i>CONS</i>	<p>Will date easily</p> <p>Difficult to convey volume of information without looking unwieldy and off-putting</p> <p>Some felt it was a very costly item to produce and distribute.</p>	<p>Still need to market the website to promote awareness</p> <p>Easy to forget about</p> <p>Not all sectors have a high degree of computer literacy or access.</p>

8.18 Nearly everyone agreed that a key aspect for any written information sent to employers was the need for brevity given the limited time that most employers have. A lack of jargon and bureaucracy was also felt to be

necessary, as many employers have little acquaintance with the terminology surrounding qualifications and education.

- 8.19 Two examples of good practice in terms of a usable and comprehensive guide were mentioned during the discussions. One was geared towards Health (Move in, Move On, Move Up), and the other childcare (this produced by Wandsworth Borough Council).
- 8.20 It was widely felt by employers and trade bodies that both public and private providers should be included in the guide in order that it was as comprehensive as possible. Some colleges had concerns about this and feared that comparisons between providers may favour private providers without a fair comparison having been made (e.g. courses provided more cheaply or less time required to attain a qualification because corners are cut).
- 8.21 In a similar way, some assessment of course quality was favoured amongst employers and trade bodies alike. Again some providers worried about the difficulty of capturing the key information by which providers should be compared providers or courses, factors like reputation, having strong employer links or good understanding of the needs of the sector and other 'qualitative' measures. Some worry it would end up with factual comparisons on quantitative measures such as retention and achievement, which can convey a misleading picture.
- 8.22 Trade bodies felt quite strongly that there needed to be some kind of standard displayed when courses were described in order to give employers something to guide them. One trade body suggested a 10-point criteria on which establishments could be graded, based on amount of employer interaction, whether the employer goes through objectives with the employer before the course commences, if they have a complaints procedure etc.
- 8.23 One hospitality and tourism association explained that they were considering the idea of a kitemark system, which would act as a form of reassurance that courses were bona fide and industry approved. This idea, which they have piloted with some of the larger employers in the hospitality industry, was well received as the idea is to base the system purely upon whether the provider meets employer needs. However, this would only be applied to publicly funded provision as the private sector was seen as too piecemeal and fast moving to keep up with. Skillset are also looking at developing a programme of industry endorsement for both HE and FE vocational qualifications. Trade bodies as a group felt that the quality issue was one with which SSCs could assist and most preferred this idea to using ALI reports and statistical information only.
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- 8.24 Whilst trade bodies tended to be very much in favour of the Employer Guide, some also mentioned that they would like to be involved in setting it up and also that the LSC must take care not to duplicate information that SSCs are already planning to provide to their sectors. Hence it was seen as something that needed to be prepared in conjunction with SSCs to avoid duplication and enhance the quality of the information.

Appendix A

A list of all **providers** interviewed (some in more than one department)

Adult College of Barking and Dagenham
Barking College
Barnet College
Bexley College
Black Coral (Blazed A Trail)
Bromley College
BTAS (Barnet College)
Building Craft College
Carshalton College
Celsian
City & Islington College
City of Westminster College
College of NW London
Croydon College
Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College
Enfield College
HCTC
Lambeth College
Lewisham College
London Academy of Film Radio & TV
London College of Beauty Therapy
London School of Marketing
MAPPS
Merton College
North West London College
Protocol Retail Croydon
Protocol Watford
Rathbone
Richmond Adult Community College
RW Rechere
South Thames College
Southwark College
Stanmore College
The London College of Fashion
The London Institute
TLT
TNG Work Skills
Tower Hamlets College
Thames Valley University
Waltham Forest College
Westminster Kingsway College

Awarding Bodies

CACHE
CITB
Edexcel

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