

Support for Success
Quality Improvement Programme



Leading learning and skills



securing quality in employer engagement a health check for colleges

Philip Cox

mission and strategy
collaborative development
learners' employability and work-readiness
services to employers
target setting
service standards
performance monitoring
information management
staffing and resources

Support for Success Quality Improvement Programme

The Support for Success Quality Improvement Programme is funded by the Learning and Skills Council and delivered by the Learning and Skills Development Agency in partnership with the Association of Colleges, Inclusion and NIACE.

The programme aims to help providers to:

- **enhance their capacity for self-improvement**
- **share good practice**

and provides support and resources on:

- quality management at a strategic level
- continuous improvement
- improving outcomes and measuring success
- equality and diversity
- meeting local and regional needs.

Find out more about the Support for Success Quality Improvement Programme at www.s4s.org.uk.

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Published by the Learning and Skills Development Agency

www.LSDA.org.uk

Registered with the Charity Commissioners

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Copyeditor: Helen Lund
Designer: Pat Kahn
Series designer: David Shaw
Cover illustrator: David Shaw and Pat Kahn
Printer: Blackmore Ltd, Shaftesbury, Dorset

041753RS /04/05/3000

ISBN 1 84572 077 6

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**This publication is funded by the Learning and Skills Council
as part of a contracted support and development programme.**

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About the author

Philip Cox is a development adviser for quality assurance and improvement at the Learning and Skills Development Agency. In this capacity, he is responsible for advising on strategies, policies and processes for quality improvement within post-16 learning and for managing quality networks offered as part of the Support for Success Quality Improvement Programme. During a lengthy career in education and training, Philip has published a range of good practice guides on quality improvement. He has also undertaken development work for national and international agencies, including UNESCO and the British Council.

Introduction

This quality health check on employer engagement was originally prepared as part of a programme of development activity undertaken through the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) Regional Further Education Quality Networks in the session 2003/4. The networks are membership-based and run as part of the LSC-funded Support for Success Quality Improvement programme (henceforth s4s programme).

The health check was designed as a self-assessment tool to help member colleges review the quality of their provision for employer engagement, identify good practice and prioritise development needs. It has been successfully used as part of college-wide self-assessment processes, to support college planning and for staff development purposes. The health check has also been used to carry out a survey of policy and practice on employer engagement in a number of member colleges.

Feedback on use of the health check has been very positive and requests for access to this document continue to be received from learning providers and local Learning and Skills Councils. For this reason, the health check is now being made available as a formal publication from the s4s programme.

The findings emerging from the use of the health check to survey college practice are reported on in a sister publication (Gillard and Cox 2005). Both publications will form part of a compendium of materials on employer engagement that is being compiled by LSDA (see in particular Hughes 2003; Hughes 2004).

Though designed primarily to support self-assessment and development at a 'whole college' level, the health check may be used to review provision within individual departments or services of a college. It may also be used to 'benchmark' policy and practice with other colleges. Whilst the health check was designed specifically for further education colleges, it can be used or adapted by providers in other parts of the learning and skills sector.

Policy context

The government has given the learning and skills sector a key role in developing skills for productivity. Its Skills Strategy White Paper (DfES 2003) firmly commits the government to building the capacity of learning providers to support employer skill needs and providing incentives to make this happen. Employer engagement is also central to the policy agenda set out in *Success for all* (DfES 2002), including the setting of headline performance measures within 3-year development plans, the needs matching associated with Strategic Area Reviews and the extension of the Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) initiative. As a result of these initiatives, all learning providers are now expected to demonstrate more clearly their contribution to meeting the skill needs of employers and learners.

The concept of 'employer engagement' is still evolving. It covers a range of activities undertaken collaboratively by learning providers and employers to improve the productivity and competitiveness of the workforce and reduce the skills gap. Alternative phrases such as 'provider responsiveness' and 'meeting learner and employer skill needs' are sometimes used as synonyms for 'employer engagement'.

More specifically and for the purposes of this publication, employer engagement includes:

- how employers are involved in the design, development, management and delivery of learning to improve the 'work-readiness' and employability of learners
- the direct services that colleges offer to employers, including training needs analysis and bespoke training courses
- the strategic partnerships that colleges form with employers, with other providers and with national / regional agencies to meet the skill needs of local areas.

All of these aspects of provision are included in the quality health check.

In addition to developing activities aimed at securing employer engagement, colleges and other providers are now being asked to review the embedding of such work within wider aspects of organisational policy and practice. For this purpose, attention should be given to:

- how responsiveness to employer and skill needs is addressed within the overall mission and strategy of the college
- the status of employers, in relation to service entitlements and standards offered by the college
- the development of quality policies and processes, including self-assessment, target setting, information management and staff development, to reflect the college's work on employer engagement.

All of these issues are reflected in the design of the health check and further information on this is given in the following sections.

Content and response scale

Aspects of college policy and practice

The health check has nine sections, reflecting particular aspects of policy and practice in relation to employer engagement:

- mission and strategy
- collaborative development
- employability and work-readiness of learners
- direct services to employers
- target setting
- service standards
- performance monitoring and improvement
- information management
- staffing and other resources.

Quality statements

Each section includes between five and eight quality statements designed to elicit judgements on specific aspects of provision. For example, the section on information management asks whether the college systematically collects information and data on its work with employers. It also asks whether the college uses a single data record for each employer when collecting this data [equivalent to the individualised learner record].

For each quality statement, the user is asked to record:

- good practice (with cited evidence)
- development needs
- the scale of the development need (based on a five-point grading scale).

The grading scale

The health check uses a five-point scale for assessing current provision.

1	2	3	4	5
provision is fully developed	provision is partially developed	provision is under development	development activity identified, but not yet started	no development needs have been identified

Overview

On the basis of judgements derived from the nine sections of the health check, users are invited to make summative judgements on the strengths of current provision, areas and opportunities for improvement and barriers to improvement. They are also asked to record their main strategies for improving and extending provision for employer engagement.

Bibliography

Items marked with a tick ✓ represent further reading which is particularly relevant to this guide.

DfES (2002). *Success for all: reforming further education and training – our vision for the future.*

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DfES (2003). *21st century skills: realising our potential: individuals, employers, nation.* Skills Strategy White Paper. CM5810. Norwich: HMSO.

- ✓ Gillard K and Cox P (2005). *Securing quality in employer engagement – messages from college practice.* London: Learning and Skills Development Agency.
- ✓ Hughes M (2003). *Successful engagement: guidance for colleges and providers on effective employer engagement in post-16 learning.* London: Learning and Skills Development Agency.
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Quality health check on employer engagement

Mission and strategy

Collaborative development

Employability and work-readiness of learners

Direct services to employers

Target setting

Service standards

Performance monitoring and improvement

Information management

Staffing and other resources

Overview

Mission and strategy

Add grade 1–5 from scale below

	Development needs	Good practice (with cited evidence)
Local skill needs are addressed in the mission and strategy of the college <input type="checkbox"/>		
The college makes systematic use of labour market information for planning purposes <input type="checkbox"/>		
Supporting the training and development needs of employers is a key part of the college mission / strategy <input type="checkbox"/>		
Employer / local skill needs have a key influence on programme development within the college <input type="checkbox"/>		
Curriculum development is focused on the employability and work-readiness of learners <input type="checkbox"/>		
Cross-college policies and processes ensure that employer engagement is central to all parts of college provision <input type="checkbox"/>		
Other (please specify) <input type="checkbox"/>		

Grading scale

- | | | | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| provision is fully developed | provision is partially developed | provision is under development | development activity identified, but not yet started | no development needs have been identified |

Collaborative development

Add grade 1-5 from scale below	Development needs	Good practice (with cited evidence)
The college works in partnership with other learning providers to promote employer engagement <input type="checkbox"/>		
The college works collaboratively with the LSC, the Regional Development Agency, Sector Skills Councils and other agencies to support employer engagement <input type="checkbox"/>		
The college works in partnership with schools, work-based learning and higher education providers to improve provision for, and access to, vocational education and training <input type="checkbox"/>		
Good practice in employer engagement is systematically shared within the college (including CoVEs) <input type="checkbox"/>		
Good practice in employer engagement is systematically shared with colleges and other learning providers (including CoVEs) <input type="checkbox"/>		
Other (please specify) <input type="checkbox"/>		

Grading scale

- | | | | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| provision is fully developed | provision is partially developed | provision is under development | development activity identified, but not yet started | no development needs have been identified |

Employability and work-readiness of learners

Add grade 1–5 from scale below	Development needs	Good practice (with cited evidence)
Employers are involved in the design and development of programmes <input type="checkbox"/>		
Employers are involved in the management and delivery of programmes and the assessment of learning <input type="checkbox"/>		
The college offers a broad and accessible vocational curriculum <input type="checkbox"/>		
The college offers work-based routes to learning and purposeful work experience <input type="checkbox"/>		
Learner support and guidance services are orientated to the world of work <input type="checkbox"/>		
Other (please specify) <input type="checkbox"/>		

Grading scale

1

provision is fully developed

2

provision is partially developed

3

provision is under development

4

development activity identified, but not yet started

5

no development needs have been identified

Direct services to employers

Add grade 1-5 from scale below

	Development needs	Good practice (with cited evidence)
The college supports employers in identifying training needs and opportunities <input type="checkbox"/>		
Modern Apprenticeship frameworks are in place within the college <input type="checkbox"/>		
Bespoke courses are provided for local companies <input type="checkbox"/>		
There is provision for the accreditation of company learning schemes <input type="checkbox"/>		
Research and product development services are available to employers <input type="checkbox"/>		
Problem-solving and innovation services are available to employers <input type="checkbox"/>		
Networks are provided to support the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises <input type="checkbox"/>		
Other (please specify) <input type="checkbox"/>		

Grading scale

- | | | | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| provision is fully developed | provision is partially developed | provision is under development | development activity identified, but not yet started | no development needs have been identified |

Target setting

Add grade 1–5 from scale below

	Development needs	Good practice (with cited evidence)
The college sets clear targets for developing direct services to employers (state targets: current and proposed) <input type="checkbox"/>		
The college sets clear targets for increasing the employability or work-readiness of learners (state targets: current and proposed) <input type="checkbox"/>		
Employer engagement targets are informed by the overall strategy of the college. <input type="checkbox"/>		
Employer engagement targets are informed by the objectives of the LSC, the RDA, SSCs and other agencies <input type="checkbox"/>		
Other (please specify) <input type="checkbox"/>		

Grading scale

- | | | | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| provision is fully developed | provision is partially developed | provision is under development | development activity identified, but not yet started | no development needs have been identified |

Service standards

Add grade 1-5 from scale below	Development needs	Good practice (with cited evidence)
The college accords a status to employers as customers equivalent to that bestowed upon learners <input type="checkbox"/>		
The college sets quality standards for the provision of direct services to employers <input type="checkbox"/>		
The college sets quality standards for assuring the employability / work-readiness of learners <input type="checkbox"/>		
Quality standards for employer engagement are defined within a college charter <input type="checkbox"/>		
There is a formal process for dealing with employer enquiries and complaints <input type="checkbox"/>		
Other (please specify) <input type="checkbox"/>		

Grading scale

- | | | | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| provision is fully developed | provision is partially developed | provision is under development | development activity identified, but not yet started | no development needs have been identified |

Performance monitoring and improvement

Add grade 1–5 from scale below	Development needs	Good practice (with cited evidence)
The college systematically collects data on the needs and satisfaction levels of employers <input type="checkbox"/>		
The college systematically monitors its performance against employer engagement targets and service standards <input type="checkbox"/>		
Employer engagement issues are addressed within the self-assessment framework and processes of the college <input type="checkbox"/>		
The college monitors and evaluates the impact of its work with employers <input type="checkbox"/>		
Employers are informed of the outcomes of monitoring work on employer engagement <input type="checkbox"/>		
Other (please specify) <input type="checkbox"/>		

Grading scale

- | | | | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| provision is fully developed | provision is partially developed | provision is under development | development activity identified, but not yet started | no development needs have been identified |

Information management

Add grade 1-5 from scale below	Development needs	Good practice (with cited evidence)
Staff are aware of the need to collect information and data on their work with employers <input type="checkbox"/>		
The college systematically records information and data on its work with employers <input type="checkbox"/>		
Management information systems provide timely and accurate data on the extent and nature of the college's work with employers <input type="checkbox"/>		
The college has a single data record for each employer [equivalent to the individualised learner record] <input type="checkbox"/>		
Other (please specify) <input type="checkbox"/>		

Grading scale

- | | | | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| provision is fully developed | provision is partially developed | provision is under development | development activity identified, but not yet started | no development needs have been identified |

Staffing and other resources

Add grade 1–5 from scale below	Development needs	Good practice (with cited evidence)
Capabilities in working with employers are addressed in staff recruitment and development processes <input type="checkbox"/>		
Staff maintain close contact with current industrial, commercial or professional practice <input type="checkbox"/>		
Staff have opportunities for work placements or secondments <input type="checkbox"/>		
Staff are recognised and rewarded for promoting relationships with employers (linked to appraisal) <input type="checkbox"/>		
Equipment and facilities are appropriate to the needs and expectations of employers <input type="checkbox"/>		
Accommodation is appropriate to the needs and expectations of employers <input type="checkbox"/>		
Funding streams are sufficient to support and promote employer engagement <input type="checkbox"/>		
Other (please specify) <input type="checkbox"/>		

Grading scale

- | | | | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| provision is fully developed | provision is partially developed | provision is under development | development activity identified, but not yet started | no development needs have been identified |

**Support for Success
Quality Improvement Programme**



Overview

In responding to employers' needs and local skill needs and ensuring the employability and work-readiness of learners:

What are the main strengths of college provision?

What are the main areas for improvement?

What are the main opportunities for improvement?

What are the main barriers to improvement?

What are the main strategies for **improving** and **extending** provision for employer engagement within the college?

Support for Success Quality Improvement Programme

This quality health check on employer engagement was originally prepared as part of a programme of development activity undertaken through the Learning and Skills Development Agency Regional Further Education Quality Networks.

It is designed to help colleges review the quality of their provision for employer engagement, identify good practice and prioritise development needs. It can be used for self-assessment, planning or staff development purposes.

Though designed specifically for further education colleges, the health check can be used or adapted by providers in other parts of the learning and skills sector.

ISBN 1 84572 077 6