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## Quality improvement in work-based learning: Somerset College

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### Brief description

In a four year period Somerset College transformed work-based learning that was judged inadequate overall, with success rates 30% below national averages, to provision graded outstanding with rates above national averages. This example focuses on what they do now to perform so well.

### Overview – the provider’s message

‘Four years ago we had some pockets of good practice in work-based learning but overall there was not enough focus on the programmes and ensuring that learners succeeded in a timely way. Now work-based learning has a much higher profile in the college. It is better and more tightly managed, and a new central team is a crucial part of an enhanced approach. We have improved organisational aspects, such as the range of programmes. However, the main improvements have been challenging learners to keep up a good pace of learning and to complete in more challenging timescales, while closely monitoring and supporting their learning.



There is no great secret to improving work-based learning. Have a good look at how you organise your provision. Make sure your management systems can provide support and challenge at all levels. Communicate well with your staff and employers. But importantly ensure that your learners receive support in a timely fashion, and they retain momentum in their learning’.

*Sue Parker, Director of Enterprise*

### The good practice in detail

The college has made remarkable progress in improving work-based learning provision. The [inspection report](#) in 2007 said ‘success rates in work-based learning remain low and target setting for learners remains an area for improvement’. The most recent [inspection report](#) in 2011 commented that ‘success rates on work-based learning programmes are very high and are a real success story’ and that ‘work-based learning assessment is very good with regular and frequent assessment contributing to the high success rates’.

The changes over this period have touched on most aspects of the provision, from the learners through to senior management. The college is not necessarily doing any one particular thing differently from other providers, but believes that by doing a range of things well the impact on learners is positive.

## Programmes

Following the previous inspection in 2007, the college reviewed the range of programmes offered. A strategic decision was made to withdraw from some subject areas where it was felt that standards could not be raised quickly enough. The provision is now expanding, but in a carefully managed way to ensure high quality.

**‘Good communication is so important, internally and with employers and learners – and this is helped by having a mix of vocational specialists and those with a wider understanding of programme and funding requirements’ - Virginia Byrne, Employer Response Contracts Manager**

One of the key features is flexibility; partly to meet employers’ needs but also to ensure that appropriate expertise is available to support programmes. For instance, a pharmacy apprenticeship is offered in close cooperation with a local hospital that is able to provide the specialist assessors. On some health and social care courses, the off-the-job training is done through ‘block release’ to suit the needs of employers.

As part of the review of the inadequate performance, the college noted that many learners had been given a suggested programme length that was generous. Although in theory this provided for a measured approach to learning, in reality it meant that learners’ enthusiasm often waned, and it was difficult to identify those that were inactive until they had lost all interest. The programme timings are much tighter now; for instance some advanced care courses have been reduced

in notional length from three years to one year.

## Learners

The college has adopted a series of initiatives to try to ensure that the right learners are enrolled for each course. Advertising and the selection process clarify the commitment that is expected, to enable learners to choose the right type of provision. One of the most difficult aspects to deal with is the immaturity of young learners first entering the world of work. To help with this aspect, staff may suggest a full-time college course to help potential apprentices with the transition. Alternatively, they may recommend a short, one-term, college course to enhance skills but also to help learners improve their personal approach to learning; or arrange for a short period of work-experience to help the learner and to allow an employer to clearly set out their expectations in a supportive environment. In some instances, learners are encouraged, using a study skills workbook, to consider how they can improve their own approach to learning.

## Management structures and support

Some of the improvements have been driven by alterations in management structures, and changes in the way managers approach work-based learning. The Director of Enterprise is responsible for work-based learning. This has raised the profile in the college, ensuring that the provision is routinely reviewed at senior level. Major problems are quickly identified, and strategic planning is more effective.

Work-based learning is delivered by curriculum areas, and heads of department and curriculum managers are held to account for successful delivery. A central team, headed by the Employer Response Contracts Manager, has a key role to support delivery and quality monitoring. The team is led by someone who has a good background in areas such as funding, audit, quality monitoring and improvement.

The team is responsible for employer engagement (see below), data and overall funding. They work closely with other college staff to identify potential problems and to ensure that timely corrective action is taken. This internal liaison obviously relies on good routine working relationships, but it is underpinned by a series of monthly contract meetings when the director and the central team meet with those responsible for delivering the programmes. The meetings look at almost every learner in training, but with a particular emphasis on those who are approaching the end of their planned programme. In general terms, this means reviewing those with three months to go; the college aims to have a learner's programme effectively completed one month before the due date, to allow for last-minute additional work and administration. However, the meetings also look at detail across the board. There is an emphasis on quality but also on finance so that managers appreciate how work-based learning programmes are an important part of their resources, and how poor progress and success can affect budgets.

**‘Engagement with employers is key; get them to accept your staff as competent professionals who are industry aware and can be flexible to meet their particular requirements’ – Joan Springer, Curriculum Area Manager, Social and Professional Studies**

### **Employer engagement**

The employer responsive team plays an important part in finding new employers, carrying out the routine requirements of ‘sign up’ in an effective way, and checking health and safety and regulatory matters. But they also work hard on maintaining close links with employers so that early problems with individual learners and programmes are quickly identified. This work is done through face-to-face meetings, email, planned telephone calls and, for the larger employers, formal regular reports and eight-weekly meetings. The team prides itself on speed of response to queries, by responding professionally and aiming to nip any problems in the bud. The flexible approach to programmes and the careful selection of learners are also seen as important parts of keeping employers fully engaged with work-based learning. Some of this flexibility reflects the rigour of the initial contact with employers, where an organisational training needs analysis is carried out, prior to a formal proposal. That proposal sets objectives for training. The objectives are then formally reviewed at the end of the programme, or at intervals for continuing employers, so that both sides can be convinced of the effectiveness of the approach.

The visiting assessor has a critical part to play in maintaining constructive contacts. These good contacts are used well to move apprentices between employers to provide assessment opportunities. Existing employers also provide references for new employers.

### **Monitoring**

The monitoring of learners’ progress has been a key part of driving improvements. There is better record keeping, enhanced data, and formal monthly monitoring meetings. Curriculum managers monitor their provision more effectively through internal meetings and reviews.

Assessors make the final decisions about how well their learners are progressing, and their judgements are recorded online to allow managers to monitor progress and challenge perceived difficulties. The provision is also part of the college-wide termly 'RAS' (retention, achievements, success) reviews led by the Principal.

## Staff

**'As part of rebuilding our work-based learning offer we put in place monitoring and management systems first, and then expanded, knowing we could keep a close eye on quality' - Rachel Davies, Principal**

Employers, central teams and college managers all have a role to play in ensuring the success of a work-based learning programme, but it is assessors, and where applicable college tutors, that play the key role in motivating learners. The college has some excellent staff. The use of agency staff is kept to a minimum. Continuity of staff is important and is encouraged by appropriate support and recognition. Staff development is effective, with a mix of professional and vocational development to ensure that learners are not disadvantaged by any changes in programme requirements. Assessors maintain good links with employers and in some areas there are annual development days as well as reference to industry developments in standardisation meetings. Sharing of good practice is encouraged and the central team identify what should be shared, for instance

during their employer-responsive annual training day. Interestingly the number of learners that assessors support is not particularly low compared with other providers, at 50–70 learners for a full-time assessor. Curriculum areas, where possible, look carefully at the potential learner and employer and try to match them with an assessor who has the same temperament and approach.

## Provider background

**Somerset College** is a medium-sized general further education college situated in Taunton. Nearly all of the provision is based on one site close to the town centre. The college offers largely vocational provision in most subject areas and at all levels.

There is a sizeable cohort of learners aged 14 to 16 from local schools and substantial higher education provision in partnership with the University of Plymouth. In 2009/10, around 70 learners completed apprenticeship programmes, and some 800 successfully completed Train to Gain Programmes.



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