



FE Industry Champions

A Report for the Greater Cambridge Partnership

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On the Further Education Sector in Greater Cambridge

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Executive Summary

This report highlights how colleges in the Greater Cambridge Area are helping to tackle skills gaps in the workforces of companies across the sub region.

The report attempts to get underneath/beyond the rhetoric and see some of the excellent work which colleges in the Greater Cambridge area are doing with employers. This partly requires a change in mindset, especially from employers but also from wider stakeholders (e.g. funders; influencers; collaborators etc). For employers, it's important to suspend judgement before asking the question: what am I looking for in a training provider? The following list may be a useful start:

1. Expertise – in the right subject area
2. Flexibility – to deliver training at the right time and place
3. Guidance – to help the company make the right choices
4. Follow through – to ensure there is some continuity from training to implementation.

For stakeholders it may be important to ask:

- What are FE colleges expected to deliver?
- Is the distinction between 'pre-work' and 'in-work' clearly made?

These questions will hopefully aid the reader in coming to their own view about the impact colleges in the GCP area have on their local business community.

This work is not meant to be in any way, an inspection report, or a commentary on meeting a particular standard. Rather, it attempts to cast a light on some good work being done by colleges in the GCP area in relation to employer engagement.

The case studies show that the further education sector has both the experience and resourcefulness to engage with industry, not just for government funded apprenticeships, or Train to Gain subsidised training but right across the spectrum of workforce needs – and often irrespective of who pays.

It is this ability to see beyond the short term need that puts colleges in a bracket of their own. There will always be small specialist providers who can turn around a training need, just in time, at the right price, when and where the employer wants; but when it comes to offering an integrated workforce development service – for short term and long term needs, FE is difficult to compete with. Moreover, several colleges actively work with private sector partners to deliver a more rounded service – identifying the training required – and providing an honest broker role so the company gets the most suitable delivery team.

Negative perceptions can hold fast even when there are good examples of colleges engaging with businesses in all the ways that businesses would like to be engaged. So why does the perception remain? Not all of the responsibility lies with business; the FE sector as a whole, and individual colleges specifically, have a duty to explain clearly to industry how they can help meet its needs.

Colleges have a responsibility to clearly relay to businesses what they can and can't do for them. And where there are shortcomings, it would be much better to highlight them and then identify ways of improving the service, rather than ignore them and hope the 'good news' will provide a sufficient counterweight (and funding stream!).

In short this report shows that "FE works". That needs celebrating, nurturing and building on for the future.

Introduction

This report highlights how colleges in the Greater Cambridge Area are helping to tackle skills gaps in the workforces of companies across the sub region.

Overview – skills gaps and employers

This report has come out of, and fits into the work being undertaken on skills gaps and solutions in key sectors of the GCP economy. The work has involved isolating skills gaps from skills shortages and identifying what sort of skills issues arise in different sectors. The importance of the distinction between a gap and a shortage cannot be overemphasised because it impacts directly on how we might view colleges work:

Skills shortages refer to the need for new people with the right skills to join the workforce of a particular sector. This forms the bulk of FE work, training people to fit job vacancies of the future. Of necessity, it involves a lot of planning, forecasting and guesswork. It is also very much a scatter gun approach to matching supply with demand because, first of all there is no guarantee that the forecast demand for a skill in a particular sector actually turns out to be in demand two or three years down the line. But also, there is no guarantee that the person with the new skill will actually take up work in the sector which originally forecast the demand. So colleges are tasked with delivering skills to the economy as a whole rather than delivering pinpointed demand led skills for particular sectors or localities; hence the reference to a “scattergun” approach.

Skills gaps are about existing people in the workforce not having the right skills to perform the job they are doing. This is a very specific problem which requires a specific remedy. Addressing skills gaps can be called a “precision” tool in the arsenal of training providers; it delivers the skill to the person who is required to the job. Once this distinction is fully appreciated, one can begin to separate out certain ‘myths’ about further education. The myth for example, that FE doesn’t deliver what employers need may be caught up in the skills shortages debate in which case it should be made clear that main stream full time training is a role given to FE by society and not one which can, with any accuracy, give employers what they want, when they want it. Equally the myth that colleges are not places for businesses may be dispelled by referring to the different roles FE has.

Continuing on the theme of skills gaps one can look further into what is involved in addressing employers needs, and how FE may often be able to deliver a more comprehensive solution than the private sector. First of all, the resources that most colleges have in terms of premises (often including satellite sites); facilities (industry standard equipment and facilities perhaps bought as part of a COVE bid); and of course, staff (often highly qualified; with CPD to keep relevant and up to date; and with regular teaching experience adapted to many different situations), mean that they should have a built in advantage compared to other providers. Secondly, the experience in identifying skills needs can open up the possibilities for a more skilled workforce in often unimagined ways. This might include ‘unearthing’ skills gaps which hadn’t been previously identified, leading to a more effective workforce and a ‘bottom line’ difference to profit. Whilst it is true that good training needs analysis isn’t just the preserve of FE, the fact that more specialist private providers may not

have the breadth of provision to cope with differing needs mitigates against them finding them in the first place. The diversity of FE colleges needs to be seen as a strength in this context rather than a weakness because of lack of specialisation. As a rule, it may be more fair to say that FE is the “specialist” provider of skills for industry.

Skills gaps can often be addressed through short courses and many employers refer to this as part of their criticism of government funded training. But colleges are in an excellent position to deliver short courses to businesses *and* to build long term “follow-through” relationships which ensure that a company isn’t wasting a training investment on a ‘single shot’ course. A recent example of this dilemma arose in the GCP area: A small employer was contacted, as part of this project, to find out about his training needs. He had recently invested in a private training provider to deliver a course focused on “lean” production for his supervisors. The course was “expensive” even though it had been 50% funded by a regional training programme for SMEs; the employer commented that it had been a complete waste of money – “initially there was the wow factor, but then they returned to bad habits” he said. Feeling a great sense of inadequacy in asking questions about training issues and hearing such a depressing story, this writer suggested the employer spoke to the business development manager at the local college. Whether there is a successful outcome remains to be seen but the point is hopefully clear: Local colleges are for local businesses – not just for one occasion, not just while the contract lasts, but forever! The college needs to be seen in this light, as the beacon for businesses who have workforce skills needs.

FE Environment & Challenge

FE has sometimes had a hard time convincing the world that it can respond to employers needs. Train to Gain contracts haven’t necessarily helped their cause: free training, for NVQ work based training isn’t necessarily the same as meeting an employer’s needs for training. What is free may not be valued and what is delivered to prescribed pre-defined contracts (NVQ outcomes) can appear more of a supply led initiative rather than a demand led outcome.

Moreover, Train to Gain government funding has opened up the market place – so that all kinds of fast response, lean suppliers of training could compete for a slice of LSC ‘business’. Colleges with their core, full time 16-19 year old market needing to come first – have sometimes lost out to smaller more employer focused providers. And even when they have got the business, and its been delivered well, that doesn’t guarantee that the employer will come back for other kinds of training, e.g. full cost short courses, delivering specific skills to the workplace. It is too easy for FE to be ‘type-cast’ as deliverers of government funded training and nothing more.

There is a further problem for further education colleges: FE is often seen as a panacea for all of society’s needs which have not been met at school or which university has no place for. So colleges are charged with tackling social exclusion, and some have worn this particular badge with pride and determination to address inequality in their communities. But this doesn’t necessarily help the perception of the college as a ‘first port of call’ for businesses

wanting training. Indeed it may work against the college – so that it is perceived as a bastion against social deprivation rather than as a place for “doing business”.

Aside from the social inclusion argument, colleges are places where young people go to learn a skill. This full time provision is the core work of FE – the 80% which needs to be nurtured. Having time and resources to focus on the 20% - upskilling the UK workforce can be onerous – and at times in direct conflict with mainstream full time provision (e.g. allocating space in the college). And of course, a place which is 80% occupied by young people is going to look like an institution for teenagers – not a resource for businesses.

So before we even start to talk about quality, it is fair to say that FE faces an uphill struggle just to get a seat at the workforce training table.

Approach to case studies

The purpose of this report is to attempt to get underneath/beyond the rhetoric and see some of the excellent work which colleges in the Greater Cambridge area are doing with employers. This partly requires a change in mindset, especially from employers but also from wider stakeholders (e.g. funders; influencers; collaborators etc). For employers, it's important to suspend judgement before asking the question: what am I looking for in a training provider? The following list may be a useful start:

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Case Studies

Cambridge Regional College

Cambridge Regional College has a track record in delivering training solutions to industry. As a result of recent consolidation in one location, it has very modern facilities on a large single site close to Cambridge Science Park. The College was recently recognised with a Beacon Award for its pioneering construction curriculum which gives students access to career opportunities in the construction developments emerging in the Cambridgeshire growth area. A wide range of staff specialisms enables students to undertake a range of construction specific options.

The SmartLIFE Training centre at the Science Park campus offers excellent facilities in a professional environment. This Centre for Sustainable Development is recognised as the region's focal point for the design and delivery of skills training and knowledge in gas, electrical and renewable energy technologies, modern methods of construction and sustainable development. As an NIC-EIC approved training provider, the Energy Systems Centre has gained a regional reputation for providing high quality training.

Case study G's Marketing

Ray Hilton is an example of good employer engagement. Ray had worked in the private sector for most of his career. He came out of Philips in Cambridge to set up CRC's Business Centre. From the start, Ray's philosophy has been about building long term relationships. "Short courses on their own just don't do it" Ray insists. He goes on to demonstrate why his sustainable training model offers far more to companies than a "quick fix". These days, Ray has retired from a departmental management role, preferring to spend his time working with companies.

G's is based in Barway close to Ely, Cambridgeshire. With 1100 permanent staff of which some 700 are based in this region, G's is an example of a successful large food company, integrating several parts of the supply chain from farming to processing and distribution. Ray Hilton has "account managed" the company over the last 5 years and has built up a relationship of trust. The following examples amounting to more than 200 staff in training, illustrate the depth and breadth of skills work being delivered at G's and hopefully they show how relationship building is the key to success.

- As with many food processing companies, G's is reliant on a significant proportion of migrant labour. Around 30% of the workforce is non UK residents coming from Portugal; Poland and; other Eastern European countries. CRC runs ESOL courses on site (at the company) four days a week (Monday – Thursday) for over 80 enrolled staff, and on Fridays a Spanish course has been organised for a further 25 staff to support the company's food production in Spain. Ray has responded to demand by allocating 2 CRC ESOL staff to G's. The commitment to helping people speak and write English has obvious practical benefits for the company, and it has allowed people who may otherwise have been left as production operatives to progress in the company.

- The language of business can be a barrier even to the best of English speakers – so CRC have arranged for more specific “Business English” courses to help staff become more familiar with key business phrases.

- A 2 year management programme has recently been set up. It is the result of a compact between the CMI (Chartered Management Institute); G’s and CRC. CMI is the awarding body and accredits the programme; Cambridge Regional College provides the quality framework and ensures that the course proceeds to national standards. Paul Waller - G’s Group Learning and Development Manager - has designed and delivered most of the training, supported by CRC staff as required and requested. Some 40 learners are enrolled and have to complete assignments over a 2 year period to qualify for the CMI awards. Whilst short courses, which Paul also delivers (certified by CRC) might have appeared to be a more efficient method of upskilling, the CMI/G’s/CRC course ensures that learning outcomes are embedded over time in a ‘learning by doing’ process – to the benefit of the company and the employee, resulting in a more cost effective solution in the long term.

- The NVQ in Business Improvement Techniques (BIT) is a popular training tool. At G’s the course is being implemented in exciting and innovative ways across all aspects of their food production (beetroot, onions, garlic, lettuce, celery, radish etc). Small teams of staff (up to 10 in a team) are brought together to learn the principles of BIT and apply these to all aspects of their work. Concentrating on cost, quality and delivery, everyone involved learns how to help minimise waste, and contribute to the efficient running of the operation through specific projects with measured outcomes.

- By way of example, dealing with fresh produce inevitably involves a battle against perish-ability, the environment and produce quality. Demands from large food retailers need to be managed to ensure the shortest time distance between picking in the field and delivery to supermarket shelves is achieved; anywhere in the supply chain that can be shortened is welcomed. At G’s, the warehousing factory principle is being brought into the field so that picking and packing become an integrated outdoor task. This requires a high degree of customisation involving bespoke rigs designed in G’s own workshops especially for the fields (the machinery is actually packed up and shipped to Spain for their picking season and then comes back again in time for the British season). Since the machinery is entirely bespoke, there are no OEM manuals or training courses to show how it works, so when it breaks down, G’s engineers are always on call to make repairs. The CRC Business Improvement Techniques programme has been designed with this specific set of challenges in mind, working on the key performance indicator of overall equipment efficiency to drive down waste and make improvements in cost, quality and delivery.

- The relationship that G’s has built up with the college means that CRC is seen as the first port of call for training enquiries. As the account

manager, Ray Hilton works hard to meet their needs and this has led to a range of other courses being arranged from warehousing and business administration to customer service.

- Further evidence of the special relationship between the two organisations is revealed in the proposed induction video being developed for G's staff. It will be created by college students who will liaise with G's HR staff to identify requirements and then researched to find the best means of making the video.
- Food processing companies are not obvious candidates for taking on apprenticeships. But G's have requested to start an apprenticeship programme in conjunction with CRC for engineers, administrators and other staff as the programme develops. It's another demonstration of how G's has become a truly learning organisation and the close relationship built up between the company and the college – and it will underpin G's HR succession planning – an area which is often left to chance in businesses.

West Suffolk College

West Suffolk College exudes a certain kind of confidence which comes from years of stability. Where in some organisations, this might breed complacency, at West Suffolk College it has led to a strong sense of purpose and direction and a determination to put the business community at the heart of what it does. This is reflected in the string of awards for outstanding provision (Ofsted); its Beacon status for excellence; Matrix accreditation; Investors in People award; and not least, its achievement in receiving the TQS award (Training Quality Standard) in all seven vocational areas.

The college provides training for some 14 – 18 year olds but its main focus (almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of provision) is people over 19 years old. This gives it a sense of maturity which is sometimes lacking in other colleges.

West Suffolk College is a shining example of employer responsiveness. Since 1993, when it became incorporated it made a conscious decision to focus on employer needs and “full cost” work, and this has paid dividends over the years, building a loyal customer base (it worked with over 1400 employers last year), and perhaps more importantly, developing internal response and delivery systems to meet demand. This sound forward planning function is helped by the length of time the **senior management team** have been at the college. Its given them a sense of ownership and deep understanding of the college mission, along with a good knowledge of the business environment in which they operate. There is a real sense of integration of the employer focus with everything else the college does. As **Elizabeth Bray** - Head of Business Development explains, each Faculty within the college has an employer responsive team, and these teams liaise closely with the Business Services department. This two way relationship between the vocational specialists and business support generalists is the key to successful employer engagement at West Suffolk College. When enquiries for training reach the college they are referred to Business Services who identify all the needs of the employer and then contact relevant vocational (employer responsive) teams. Equally, if an enquiry comes straight to a Vocational faculty, perhaps because the employer has dealt with this person before, the Business Services team will still be informed – and the final brokerage details will originate from there rather than the Vocational unit.

The college has many examples of full cost work and excellent case studies of government funded training through Train to Gain. The latter includes work with A& B Glass (team leadership; management and IT training as well as a range of NVQs); David Johnson (out of hours training of staff); Delphi (long established relationship, workforce development project across company plus apprenticeships); British Sugar (various); Sampson Blinds (customer service training; business improvement techniques); and Delstar (bespoke training for range of staff).

In terms of full cost work, West Suffolk College achieved £650,000 of commercial income directly from full cost (non funded) training to businesses last year. This suggests that they won't suffer unduly from cuts in subsidies from programmes such as Train to Gain. Indeed the full cost foundations laid by the college over the last 17 years means they are well placed to continue to provide quality training in a more competitive market place.

The College has a short course programme built around compliance training which has grown over the years. Gas, oil and electricity regulations and updates on compliance have been a regular feature of the college programme for many years – and of course the customer base has grown over time; companies and sole traders return year after year to ensure they're got the necessary new qualifications and through word of mouth new contractors enrol. All of which adds to the database of customers who receive regular updates on forthcoming training opportunities through email alerts; e-newsletters and specific course offers.

Martyn Wagner – Vice Principal, considers the short course programme an essential barometer of industry demand. “We schedule courses only after we've clearly established a need in the community”, otherwise training has to be delivered on a “request” basis – either as a bespoke programme for a company or part of a work-based approach. Examples of this bespoke element include a project with Havebury Housing Association involving a programme designed specially to suit their needs and delivered as a commercial course at full cost.

The college's approach to employer engagement is all about listening. Through business networks; local trade associations; and stakeholder events, senior staff act as the eyes and ears of the college – and their delivery is both informed and influenced by this constant community engagement activity.

Listening on its own of course doesn't address employers needs. The attention to detail ensures that courses and marketing campaigns are planned well in advance so that potential customers are aware of what's available at the right time. This, again requires close liaison between the services to business team and the vocational units.

Scanning the horizon for the next big theme, has led West Suffolk College into some interesting partnership projects: **David Frost** is head of Construction at WSC and has been instrumental in identifying construction industry future trends and acting to ensure that the college is at the centre of new initiatives. “Build with CaRe” (Carbon Reduction) aims to “work with a wide range of construction industry organisations across northern Europe in order to make energy-efficient building design the mainstream”. Its about getting “buy-in” across the whole industry and David Frost has ensured that the college is involved. There are 17 other partners from across Europe involved in the project and West Suffolk College's role will address the issue of how to raise awareness across the construction supply chain from architects and surveyors to small construction sub-contractors. Whilst the Chartered Institute of Building Services Engineers (CIBSE) offer a range of environmental courses through their Mid Career College, few events are currently held in this region. So a short course programme coming out of West Suffolk in the future will certainly be welcome.

The college is also part of a low carbon regional competitiveness project looking at sustainability, waste and energy efficiency issues in SMEs. “SEE” (Sustainability Efficiency East) will require a significant (60%) investment of own resources from the

college, again demonstrating its commitment to wider engagement with the business community.

Chris Woods is head of Suffolk School of Management and also involved closely in developing programmes and initiatives relating to sustainability. He has spent a lot of time listening to employers and finding out what they want. “Business improvement techniques and low carbon thinking are closely related”, he says. If an energy and waste efficiency culture is to be embedded into a company its got to have “bottom line” benefits, otherwise “it just doesn’t make good business sense”. So Chris is setting up a range of short courses in waste management and waste awareness as part of an overarching “Lean” management programme. These will serve as feeder courses for more in depth programmes such as the Level 3 BIT (Business Improvement Techniques) course.

The senior management team all agree that TQS (the Training Quality Standard) is about being employer responsive, and the fact that they have achieved the standard across all seven vocational areas reflects their commitment to quality throughout the college’s provision. Chris Woods is emphatic about the need not only to ensure quality, but also to quantify the bottom line impact their work has on businesses. A typical approach will be to plan a programme which involves: identifying the issues and creating a course to meet these head on; following the initial training, Chris likes to build in a presentations ceremony within the company – this not only celebrates learning achievements but also requires the students to each commit to some SMART objectives (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant & timebound) about what they will do in the coming months to make a difference. These commitments are then evaluated at a given future date so as to measure the impact the training has had on the company. This kind of attention to “follow through” significantly raises the likelihood of results based outcomes and shows how FE can build long term successful relationships with their local business community. Of course it also embeds learning further into the organisation.

A specific example of this approach to working with employers is given by Chris Woods. It involves a public sector primary service organisation which had struggled to implement a professional development programme aimed at helping staff to progress from operational to supervisory levels. The target was set at 40 “advancements” per year – each of these requiring students to pass an assessed exam - but they were lucky if they managed 4 or 5 passes. The issue had become so critical that there was talk in some quarters of lowering the advancement standard in order to increase the number of “successful” candidates. The problem was brought to the attention of Chris, who after several meetings and much thought, decided to design a bespoke course to act as “gateway” to the advancement exam. Working on the principle that learning objectives usually need to be broken down into manageable components, Chris’s in-house programme achieved a 100% pass rate and when the same students went on to sit the (undiluted) “advancement” exam, 80% achieved the required standard. Moreover, the “gateway” course has encouraged some to go on to take the ILM (Institute of Leadership & Management) Team Leader course. The approach is regarded as a complete success by senior management in the organisation and a second cohort of students starting the “gateway” course is now underway.

Chris Woods doesn't like to take all the credit himself: "Finding someone in my team who was able to "talk the talk" of the service was an important part of the ingredients". This reinforces the unique qualities some FE colleges are able to bring to their local business community: diagnosis; creativity; matching expertise to suit the client; and the resources to follow through.

Huntingdonshire Regional College

Huntingdonshire Regional College is based in Huntingdon and St Neots but also provides learning opportunities in the workplace and in many other locations throughout the area.

Masoud Hakimi

Graduating from Essex University in 1981, Masoud worked with several international technology companies before setting up his own business in Cambridge in the 1990s. As one of the St John's Innovation Centre start up businesses, Masoud won many international contracts and worked with several innovative Cambridge technology companies before choosing a career in FE at Huntingdonshire Regional College in 2005.

With recent industry experience, Masoud quickly realised that the college needed to invest in new technology if it was to have credibility with local industry; a successful COVE bid in 2005 enabled the college to become a Manufacturing Centre of Vocational Excellence with IT equipment, CAD/CAM software and computerised milling machines installed on site. This investment has helped the college develop key relationships with engineering companies in the area.

One example of this relationship building is Masoud's work with Tensor PLC, a local engineering company which produces electronic tagging systems for visitor monitoring; access control and general electronic screening for an international market. Tensor talked to Masoud about outsourcing a small batch production of 'test boxes' to China. Masoud persuaded the company to consider a different solution – using engineering students and the milling machines available at the college, Masoud successfully embedded the needs of Tensor into the course programme – giving students hands on practical experience of real industry production and creating a local solution to Tensor's needs – allowing them to test and remedy process faults locally rather than having to make journeys to China to inspect and rework components.

The production process has been broken down into small manageable activities which can be easily implemented by students and monitored by staff. It is a winning formula giving students real industry experience; the college valuable commercial income and the business a lower cost local solution. Moreover the relationship built between the college and the business has the potential to grow into a range of reciprocal training and development opportunities – the college learning from business; students gaining work experience; short course opportunities for the workforce; and collaborative projects bringing benefits all round.

A further example of Masoud's employer engagement work involves Hilton Food Group PLC, an international meat packing business whose head office is in Huntingdon. The company identified a problem about product wastage from the process of cutting meat into retailing portions. One of Masoud's students (who works for the company) has designed a programmable logic controller (PLC) to reduce wastage (by part-freezing the meat). This has helped the company achieve its waste reduction targets and shown how the college can play an important role in developing people in the workforce.

Steve Favell

Steve Favell is the Business Development Manager at Huntingdon Regional College and is charged with developing the college's profile with local businesses. Coming from the private sector, Steve initially found it difficult to see how the college could offer very much to the business community. On his first visits to companies he came away with the impression that what the employer wanted, the college couldn't provide.

However he quickly realised that the college was not simply another training provider competing for limited training opportunities; On the contrary, Steve began to see the college as the hub for the local business community, the essential component which connects up all of the other parts. Seeing things this way meant that the college was now placed at the centre of a complex training brokerage relationship – providing training solutions for businesses through its myriad contacts.

Steve understands why some businesses have a poor perception of the college. It's based on the past, when the focus was not on serving the business community but rather delivering training according to set criteria – often bearing little relation to business needs. A decade ago, "there was a lack of flexibility, lack of responsiveness and lack of understanding of business needs" says Steve. But this has changed substantially in recent years. "Now we are a community service for business".

And the figures back this up. Never has there been so much training undertaken by the college. Two years ago, 272 students were being trained in the workplace. A year later that figure had swollen to in excess of 2000 and its rising again this year. Apprenticeships have also taken off, and at the moment the college has negotiated 69 apprenticeship places with companies - all waiting to be filled by students in the coming months.

A key part of the turnaround has been the way staff network with regional stakeholders using the college as a community hub. Building relationships with other public sector agencies rather than viewing them as potential competitors has paid dividends. For example the college has recently agreed an arrangement with JobcentrePlus to deliver training to NEETs (not in employment, education or training).

So the college provides on site facilities, off site expertise on workforce development, advice & guidance, a range of training possibilities, and access to government funding". Its this latter point that is critical to the way the college responds to business needs – and Steve is not afraid to face the issue head on. "Whilst there is government funding available, its our job to maximise the opportunities for our community and ensure that employers and employees get the best deal they can." But this doesn't mean that the college is reliant on a continuing culture of government subsidies. Their approach to supporting local businesses will prevail even when there are limited subsidies available in the future, Steve believes. Having worked in the private training market, he has first hand experience of delivering full cost courses to all types of customers including returners to work – keen to gain the latest qualifications that will enable them to get a job. So its less

about subsidies and more about delivering what's right for the employer at the best available cost.

Steve cites many examples of good practice employer engagement: from rules about following up employer enquiries (response within 48 hours); or the offer of free exploratory visits to companies and free training needs analyses; to the negotiation of company wide training using multiple funding streams to bring substantial savings to the employer (one case involved £30,000 worth of training being delivered to a company for just £800). But two examples stand out as excellent and sustainable practice:

The first example relates to a local organisation which identified a range of training needs for their workforce but needed more direct control of the training content and a style to suit the ethos of the organisation. By training up the team leader in the company to become an A1 assessor, the college was able to transfer much of the onus of delivering the training to the organisation who could then manage the programme in their preferred way. This has obvious benefits of freeing up college time and resources as well as giving an employer greater control of the actual training process. Moreover it widens the trainer pool for the local community. This particular example led to another organisation hearing about the approach and requesting a similar arrangement. The overall impact of this kind of initiative can be huge because it transfers responsibility for delivery from the college to the employer and enables far greater flexibility in the training programme.

The second example shows the impact of building close relationships with key stakeholders in the community. It concerns a meeting between the economic development department at Huntingdonshire District Council and a large private employer who wanted to talk to a training provider about potential upskilling. The Council already had good first hand experience of working with Huntingdonshire Regional College and recommended a chat with Steve, who met up with the company. This has resulted in the following training sign ups:

- 11 workers for ESOL;
- 2 have started NVQs in business administration;
- 2 have started customer service NVQs
- 1 is beginning an IT course
- 2 have enrolled on the team leader programme

and the company has for the first time embarked on an apprenticeship programme offering an initial two places.

The critical point here is that without a sound reputation and a good relationship with the council, this employer is unlikely to have chosen the college to solve its training needs.

The business development team now bring in 1/3 of college income. As they prepare for cuts in government funding, Steve Favell feels they are well placed to continue to deliver excellent training results to the local business community.

College of West Anglia

The College of West Anglia (CWA) is a dynamic further education college based across five sites (including one business centre) across West Norfolk, Fenland and Cambridge. CWA has been classified as an “outstanding” college by Ofsted. Its employer engagement team is in the process of gaining TQS (the Training Quality Standard), and has many examples of good practice - working with employers. The team work with around 800 employers across the East of England region; they have 900 apprenticeships, 70% of whom are based in engineering and construction; and 2000 people are involved in learning through the Train to Gain programme. In addition to government funded learning, the college brings in an average £0.5m commercial income, and has a range of company based full cost programmes with employers such as Bernard Mathews; Palm Paper and Nestle.

Susie Massen is head of Apprenticeships at CWA and her work involves constant liaison with employers. Whilst **Susie** can point to some very large employers who the college has worked with for many years (e.g. British Sugar; Tesco & QV Foods), it is the development of the SME market which she is most proud of. It's been a case of developing relationships with small employers and gaining their confidence so that they become receptive to the benefits of working with CWA. The apprenticeship programme has helped local companies to grow and it's brought employers closer to the college to the extent that some now see it as the first port of call for training queries. **Susie** recognises that the college can't provide everything and the Employer Engagement team have developed a series of relationships with private training providers to broaden the college offer. “With certain course requests, we will signpost employers to other providers. That may not seem advantageous but it demonstrates our role as a trusted advisor and ‘broker’ of training and a community resource for local businesses. Employers will often come back to us because we've brokered a successful solution first time round”.

Susie's apprenticeship work brings in, on average, 20 new companies a year; so the apprenticeship market is continually expanding. Whilst some colleges only offer apprenticeships on an academic year basis (starts in September only), at CWA they have a more flexible approach, using staff on more flexible contracts to deliver 52 weeks per year. Although this doesn't apply to engineering, construction and hairdressing – all of which require on site timetabling, it is a big step forward – and demonstrates the ambition of the college to provide training to businesses at the right time and place.

CWA exudes a “can do” attitude which is exemplified by the following example. Hertfordshire Youth Connexions wanted a youth workers course to fill a gap in an emerging market. But the course they were after was only available in Newcastle. The council had contacted various local providers who were unable to help. When CWA got to hear about the problem they turned the issue around. Instead of trying to match up existing provision with this newly identified need, they sent their own staff on upskilling courses so that they could teach the programme locally. The result has been a success for the college and a much more cost effective solution for Hertfordshire Youth Connexions – the programme is due to commence September 2010.

Telephone Response System

CWA have a clever but simple system in place to ensure that employers get a fast response to their queries about training. A “point of contact” pop up card has been designed which tells college staff the four steps they need to take, in responding to employer enquiries. Step 1 – Greet them and tell them who you are; Step 2 – Ask their name, Company, telephone, email and the nature of the enquiry; Step 3 – tell them you will pass the details to the CWA Employer Gateway and give them the number for future reference; Step 4 – Email the information promptly to: cwabusiness@col-westanglia.ac.uk . The cards have been placed at all telephone contact points across the college sites.

The card system is certainly a good idea – and will be backed up with sufficient training to ensure that it is “embedded” in staff procedures – especially those members of staff with responsibility for taking general enquiry calls.

Paul Smith is part of the Employer Engagement Team. He has been at CWA since 1982, having worked previously as an engineer in the print industry throughout the 1970’s. Harking back to that decade may not seem at first sight, a sign of 21st century industry awareness, but it is quickly apparent, listening to Paul that he has a wealth of knowledge and understanding of industry practice which makes him an invaluable resource for local businesses and an industry champion for the college. “In the 1970’s engineers tended to be compartmentalised – you were either a mechanical engineer or an electronic engineer and the two roles rarely crossed over”. Paul commented. “On the other hand, companies were often closed shops and in the print industry we learnt how to look after all the equipment because we weren’t allowed to bring in a specialist sub-contractor.”

Paul’s skills set became a valuable asset for the college from the start. He wrote the Industrial Electrical Maintenance Skills for Mechanical Engineers – City & Guilds 2323 programme partly in response to the need for a broader engineering portfolio and the college has been delivering this particular course ever since.

Much of Paul’s work has involved talking to employers and identifying solutions to their production problems. This started with Baxters in the 1980s who needed a bespoke programme in multi-skilling. As Paul comments: “it was heaven really, teaching mature people in work who wanted to learn”. This industry facing role has continued over the years.

Bernard Mathews had worked with various providers before meeting Paul. None had been entirely satisfactory – delivering off the shelf solutions which never quite fitted the company need. Paul created a bespoke course which got to the heart of the problem: engineers needed to broaden their approach to incorporate fault finding across disciplines. The course had, and continues to have an immediate impact. One senior supervisor summed it up thus: “As soon as they start the programme I get less call outs – because people are immediately learning how to diagnose a problem”. This course is now in its fifth year with Bernard Mathews.

With the explosion of engineering roles in non engineering companies over the last decade (see e.g. the food industry), Paul has found a common problem recurring:

Engineers are being recruited by non engineering people, and this can result in competency issues turning up further down the road. Paul Smith has begun working with one large employer to reduce this hazard. He designed a one day assessment on competence which engineering staff have to go on to identify strengths and weaknesses. Where there are weaknesses, 'top up skills' are recommended and a matrix of skills needs matched to appropriate provision is developed. The programme has gone from "strength to strength" and now every engineer recruited undertakes the assessment as a matter of course.

Conclusion

These case studies show that the further education sector has both the experience and resourcefulness to engage with industry, not just for government funded apprenticeships, or Train to Gain subsidised training but right across the spectrum of workforce needs – and often irrespective of who pays.

It is this ability to see beyond the short term need that puts colleges in a bracket of their own. There will always be small specialist providers who can turn around a training need, just in time, at the right price, when and where the employer wants; but when it comes to offering an integrated workforce development service – for short term and long term needs, FE is difficult to compete with. Moreover, several colleges actively work with private sector partners to deliver a more rounded service – identifying the training required – and providing an honest broker role so the company gets the most suitable delivery team.

What is it then, that makes some employers shy away from using their local college? At some GCP sector focus group meetings, employers have clearly expressed their disappointment with FE. A range of ‘complaints’ can be perhaps synthesised into four key perceptions that some employers have:

- College staff are out of touch with what goes on in industry
- Colleges are not able to respond flexibly to my needs
- Colleges only offer what is available through government funding so you don’t get what you want
- The college environment is unsuitable for business training

These are not minor irritations, or petty criticisms. They are fundamental to industry confidence in the FE system. If we ignore these on the basis that there is plenty of good news to counter the bad, we run the risk of these negative assumptions remaining firmly embedded in industry culture. As funding for adult training becomes more scarce, this could mark the beginning of severe deterioration in contractual relations between FE and industry. So these criticisms need to be addressed.

1. College staff are out of touch with what goes on in industry

*This can be broken down further into a **quality** issue (they don’t deliver the standard I expect); and a **relevance** issue (they don’t deliver the content I expect).*

We have seen in the case studies that neither of these perceptions are accurate. Large employers return year after year to the same college precisely because they get what they want (e.g. Cambridge Regional College’s work with G’s or the College of West Anglia’s work with Bernard Mathews); and small employers keep coming back to attend short upskilling courses (e.g. gas, oil and electricity compliance updates). These businesses get the quality and the relevance they need

2. Colleges are not able to respond flexibly to my needs

*Flexibility can be thought of in a number ways here. First there is the complaint that it can be difficult to find the right person to talk to at a college – in other words they are inflexible in their **receptiveness**. Then there is the issue of **responsiveness** – where colleges are unable to respond in time (e.g. some training is only available in term time; and many apprenticeships only have one start date –the beginning of the academic year).*

The case studies show that colleges in the Greater Cambridge area have been both receptive (e.g. the telephone system operated by CWA - College of West Anglia) and responsive (e.g. the close liaison between the business unit and vocation teams at West Suffolk College). Moreover CWA have shown that it is possible to be very flexible in all apprenticeships other than engineering, construction & hairdressing).

3. Colleges only offer what is available through government funding so you don't get what you want

The charge is that even if colleges engage with businesses – they still don't provide what the employer actually wants; its always a compromise involving government funding for narrowly prescribed outcomes.

The case studies have many examples of colleges not only delivering courses that employers want (e.g. Cambridge Regional College working with G's), but also designing courses to exactly meet employer needs because no other course exists (e.g. College of West Anglia working with Baxters and Bernard Mathews. Also Huntingdonshire Regional College working with Tensor).

4. The college environment is unsuitable for business training

Businesses sometimes perceive colleges as places for young people rather than places for business. The fact that the vast majority of provision tends to be for 16 – 19 year olds doesn't help.

Colleges have multiple roles in the community and a core part of their remit is to provide training to 16 – 19 year olds. This needn't be a weakness for business engagement. Indeed superior equipment and facilities that colleges have bid for (e.g. through coves – Cambridge Regional College – Smart Life, and Huntingdonshire Regional College – Manufacturing centre) often are directly as a result of core provision as shown in the HRC case study. These can be invaluable for building strong relationships with industry.

Not all colleges are "teen" focused. The majority (almost 75%) of provision at West Suffolk College is for people over 19.

Negative perceptions can hold fast even when there are good examples of colleges engaging with businesses in all the ways that businesses would like to be engaged. So why does the perception remain? Not all of the responsibility lies with business; the FE sector as a whole, and individual colleges specifically, have a duty to explain clearly to industry how they can help meet its needs. There are some good examples of FE promoting its employer engagement credentials – The Further Education Reputation Strategy Group (FERSG) has made important strides in this direction:

“Our vision is for the FE sector to be recognised nationally, regionally and locally as a confident and high performing sector and as the powerhouse for delivering the skills that are needed to sustain an advanced and competitive economy”.

(<http://www.feworks.org/about-us-0>)

However one only needs to look at its membership (13 organisations – all public sector apart from YMCA Training) to realise that this group may be more about defending its position rather than opening up to a dialogue with employer groups. Matching messages to audiences is a sensible idea, and in its “Key Messages” section, FERSG identifies a range of stakeholder groups to target including: government (highlighting value for money); young people; adult learners; parents (focusing on their children but missing the opportunity to promote directly to parents as learners); and employers. The latter makes some attempt to provide employers with key information about what colleges can deliver, but the language is still the language of government schemes rather than employer needs (hence, the opening two bullet points prominently feature products the government would recognise but may appear more mysterious to some or even most businesses:

Skills (including Train to Gain and employer responsiveness) –
Working together closely, employers and FE are delivering a more highly skilled workforce.

Profitability
A fully trained workforce, through Train to Gain, Apprenticeships and other qualifications, can support you in achieving your production and profitability targets.

Source: www.feworks.org/sites/default/files/FE%20Key%20Messages%20PDF_0.pdf

Colleges have a responsibility to clearly relay to businesses what they can and can't do for them. And where there are shortcomings, it would be much better to highlight them and then identify ways of improving the service, rather than ignore them and hope the 'good news' will provide a sufficient counterweight (and funding stream!).

In short this report shows that “FE works”. That needs celebrating, nurturing and building on for the future.