

Preston College

Workplace Training Services Department

*European Social Fund (Policy Field Three, Measure One)
2002/2003*

Employability Skills in the Workplace

EVALUATION REPORT

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Prepared for Preston College by

MERLIN MINDS LTD

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Section One: Introduction

- 1.1 This report is the evaluation of an ESF project, Employability Skills in the Workplace, which sought to develop and test new provision to involve people in the workplace who are low skilled and not otherwise participating. The project involved partnership between Preston College Workplace Training Services Department (Workplace Basic Skills Team), the Engineering Partnership, Lancashire, Lancaster Chamber of Commerce, and the Workplace Basic Skills Network.
- 1.2 The project was to have begun in October 2002, although in the event it received approval only in January 2003; it completed in December 2003. In October 2003 Preston College WTSD appointed John P G Smith of Merlin Minds Ltd to evaluate and report on the project.

Background to the project

- 1.3 The project sought to bring into learning people in the workplace with low level or no qualifications, in response to the evidence of a large local pool of labour in Lancashire with no NVQ equivalents, and in support of national priorities to support new, better practice in inclusive workforce learning, particularly focusing on low skilled workers, including those with low levels of basic skills. The project contributed to ESF Policy Field 3, Measure 1, and to LSC Lancashire Priorities:
- To develop learning strategies that increase and widen participation – particularly for those facing the greatest disadvantage
 - To achieve better integration between first rung provision for adults and accredited programmes to improve learner progression
 - To address the needs of the most disadvantaged and under-represented individuals by developing non-traditional learning environments and methodologies and by promoting innovative approaches to adult learning provision, including the use of ICT
 - To develop appropriate support systems which will overcome barriers to participation in learning. . . .
 - To develop learning provision for adults that is inclusive, complementary and driven by evidence of learner needs
 - To provide basic skills support for people in low skilled occupations
 - To help beneficiaries move towards other positive outcomes such as improvements in key work skills and/or attitude skills
 - To increase the number of people participating in lifelong learning and working towards a qualification

Project aims and objectives

- 1.4 The project aimed to widen participation in learning through supporting first rung provision for 150 people with low skills, and who are non-learners, via a programme which would deliver initial IT training linked to basic skills provision, leading to awards which will include START and WordPower/NumberPower.
- 1.5 It sought to achieve this by:
- Contacting 20 employers, briefing them on the project and securing their co-operation
 - Identifying those in the workforce most in need of support, recruiting them to the programme and carrying out individual needs assessments
 - Supporting flexible learning programmes, averaging 60 hours per beneficiary and accrediting outcomes
 - Reviewing next steps planning sessions with individuals and employers

Evaluation Methodology

- 1.6 The evaluator attended a number of meetings with the project manager, and a separate one with the Workplace Basic Skills Team Manager. He had access to all project records and reports, including statistics on participation and achievement, exemplar materials and background information.

Section Two: Project Activity and Achievements

- 2.1 The methodology for this project involved the Workplace Basic Skills team contacting employers, explaining the aims of the project and seeking their agreement to participate. This was achieved through a variety of means – the team produced a publicity leaflet which was the subject of a mailshot, using the Preston City Council company database, containing some 150 company details. An advertisement for the project, based on the content of the leaflet, was placed in various local trade organs and the Chamber of Commerce magazine.
- 2.2 However, these methods did not produce significant responses, and the Engineering Partnership Lancashire, also to have been involved, ceased to exist by April 2003, just as the project had started. The most effective recruitment was derived from the team's access to the LSC Lancashire Brokerage Scheme, which put them in touch with Business Link and IIP advisers with contacts with and useful local knowledge about, companies likely to be appropriate and willing participants.
- 2.3 Once the company had signed up, the team would work with managers, and input to staff meetings, to identify individual employees most likely to benefit from participation; then, having secured their commitment, the team would carry out individual needs assessments and develop a training programme tailored to needs. Programmes lasted on average 30 hours and were delivered on-site, weekly, in three hour face to face sessions, involving around eight learners per group. Learners went on to gain accreditation as appropriate.
- 2.4 While this may seem a simple enough process, it is important to note the long lead and development time required to contact, meet with and recruit an employer, before the full participation of company and employees begins and the assessments and training can start. Much time and effort was expended during the project on continuing communication with potential companies, and the project records show many examples of ongoing contacts over several weeks before the company finally decided not to participate. This represents a sound learning point for future such projects.
- 2.5 It is significant that the care sector was prominently represented amongst participating companies; the explanation is that the impetus to drive up quality standards in this sector is being led by the requirement for care home staff to be appropriately qualified. Managers and staff will have recognised the difficulty some will have faced acquiring NVQs if they had basic skills needs; furthermore, many care sector employees are required to use written communication in their day to day work, so the project was timely and well targeted. This factor will also have contributed to the very positive attitude of the employers involved, who were fully supportive and committed.

- 2.6 The original start date was to have been October 2002, but in the event approval was not received until January 2003, impacting significantly on the ability of the team to carry out the time consuming company contact and recruitment to yield meaningful numbers of participants. In October the original target of 150 beneficiaries was reprofiled to 100 and in the following month, further reprofiled to 80.
- 2.7 Given the foreshortening of the project, the team did well to achieve a total of 77 individuals receiving initial assessments and going on to learning, of whom 56 had completed and 50 having achieved Basic Skills Level 1 or 2; at project end, seven people were still in learning, with 14 having left training for a variety of personal reasons. The target to carry out 20 company visits was exceeded by five.
- 2.8 At just three beneficiaries short of revised profile and five company visits in excess of target, the project has achieved its aims and objectives.

Supplementary issues

QUESTION ONE

How did the project fit in with local initiatives? See Section One, 1.3.

Involvement of local partners. See Section Two, 2.1 and 2.2, and Section Five, 5.1 and 5.2

Flexibility to respond to local needs. See Section Two, 2.3, Section Three, 3.1, 3.2, 3.5 and 3.8

QUESTION TWO

The project did not specifically deliver capacity building activities, although the acquisition of basic skills by participants leaves them better placed to gain higher level qualifications in future; feedback from employers participating refers to many benefits of their involvement, suggesting more workplace training is likely to take place in future as a result.

QUESTION THREE

Measurement of soft outcomes. The project did not specifically measure soft outcomes. However, tutor and learner feedback shows the acquisition of personal skills by learners including motivation, reliability and confidence, and organisational skills including personal organisation.

Section Three: Innovation and Good Practice

- 3.1 The project demonstrated innovation and good practice throughout. The programmes were individually tailored and flexible in terms of content, with tutors always ready to revise in light of circumstances and employer need. For example, the team developed new materials in partnership with one company to include professional report writing, to reflect the particular need of the employer.
- 3.2 Delivery was also tailored to meet individual skills needs, circumstances and employer priorities. Generally on-site, making it accessible to participants, training was delivered at various times during the day or evening to reflect the needs of shift and work patterns.
- 3.3 Two particularly noteworthy examples of good practice emerge in this context; first, in relation to employer and individual commitment, shift workers in some companies came in while off-shift to attend training, being paid for their time, and in others workers were given paid release from work to make room for learning. Part of the project strategy was for the Workplace Basic Skills Team to negotiate paid release time.
- 3.4 Second, in a number of cases, the college and the employer signed up to formal Training Agreements, detailing the roles and responsibilities of each party. Although not enforceable, such agreements are effective ways of ensuring that all involved understand what they can expect from others and what is expected from them, and it is a practice that should be encouraged.
- 3.5 A good example of responsiveness and flexibility is highlighted in the case of Paragon Care, a domiciliary care company employing outreach workers – here, to accommodate the needs of the learning cohort who had no fixed workplace, the project team hired a community centre that was conveniently placed for all participants, making learning that much more accessible. In other cases the project was able to help with childcare, enabling some learners to participate who otherwise would have had difficulty attending.
- 3.6 The class/session sizes too warrant a mention – with only around eight learners per group, tutors were able to provide high quality and personalised support to learners.
- 3.7 The previous section refers to the time-consuming ongoing contact the team maintained with potential employer participants, and good operational practice was demonstrated by the company tracking sheet that was developed for the project. The sheet is a simple record of all contacts by all team members with particular companies,

providing an at-a-glance contact history and synopsis of current position. This enabled all team members to keep abreast of developments and to engage meaningfully with the company in the event of a contact, whether or not the individual team member had been initially responsible for working the company.

- 3.8 The project team squeezed maximum value for money from the programme by accessing separate funding to cover the diagnostic assessments of learners; and the linkage to the LSC Brokerage Scheme worked well in two ways – first, as an effective means of locating participating SMEs, and secondly, as a helpful marketing and dissemination route for this and future projects.

Section Four: Lessons Learnt

- 4.1 As indicated above, the project team regularly reviewed the programmes and materials in line with user feedback or need, thus ensuring the need for changes or different approaches to the programme were automatically built in.
- 4.2 A key lesson emerging has been referred to above – companies, particularly SMEs, are notoriously difficult to access and slow to commit, requiring a large amount of cultivation and attention. As the company tracking sheets show, in many cases, despite assiduous attention and regular contact, it is inevitable that a significant proportion will be lost; any future similar project must take the long lead time and dropout factors fully into account when establishing schedules and setting targets.
- 4.3 The poor response rate to the employer leaflet and advertisements suggests that the materials were either not reaching their intended target or not conveying the right or most appropriate messages, and it will be useful if the team were to evaluate the materials developed for this project with a selection of employers, taking their comments into account when designing a future generation of publicity.
- 4.4 Publicity material targeting potential learners has been developed and is currently being evaluated and redesigned in light of the lessons learnt in the project.

Section Five

Dissemination of Good Practice, Publicity

Good Practice

- 5.1 Good practice and outcomes from this project have been disseminated widely via range of methods. First, as mentioned above, the links between the Workplace Basic Skills Manager and the LSC Brokerage Scheme have done and continue to do much to raise the awareness of Business Link and IiP Advisers about the project and its potential, as well as the broader issue of basic skills needs in the workplace, and regular contact with this scheme, and continued dissemination of information about the project will spread the message widely.
- 5.2 In addition to this, Preston College's links to other colleges via regional and topical fora offer a good opportunity to proselytise the success and methodologies of the project.
- 5.3 Internally, project outcomes and methodologies have been disseminated to other college departments and to the other teams in the Workplace Training Services Department.
- 5.4 The Workplace Basic Skills team have begun to prepare case studies highlighting the successes of individuals participating, for use as publicity material for future projects.

Publicity

- 5.5 As mentioned above, brochures aimed at employers were produced. These are well produced with an imaginative and attractive look and key devise, and with content that refers to basic skills but does not name them as such; the leaflets are informative and concise, although in light of comments above it may be worth reviewing them in future. A copy is appended for information.
- 5.6 The advertisement referred to, which as already described, is based on the leaflet, is also appended.

Section Six: Case Study and Views of Customers/Partners

Case Study

Paragon Care

This domiciliary care organisation operates throughout the north west. It participated in this project from its Chorley office. The company was identified through the LSC Brokerage Scheme, which the Workplace Basic Skills team regard as highly effective in producing worthwhile contacts in all sectors.

Managers were keen to become involved – the drive for quality in the care sector is being led by targets for NVQs, and it has become clear that this will prove difficult to meet unless candidates have the underpinning skills to allow them to achieve NVQ. In addition, and this is particularly important in the domiciliary sector, report writing and clear recording, with auditable records, are central to the provision of care and support to clients. Analysis had shown some need for improvement in the use of language, objectivity and grammar.

Because employees operate in a range of locations (sheltered housing, for example) there was no central base for them to assemble for learning, but the project team hired the Earncroft Community Centre, which provided a central location for all eight participants on the course.

Learning was preceded by a three hour initial diagnostic assessment of all learners, and the needs identified were used to develop an appropriate 30 hour course, to be delivered in ten three hour sessions. Course content was adapted and customised after negotiation with the learners, and contextualised to the needs and practices of the company. It included objectivity in writing, grammar, punctuation grammar etc.

All eight learners were assessed at Level ½ and went forward after training, and receiving an additional six hour course to prepare them, for the national test, which was carried out by Preston tutors at the Earncroft centre, again, ensuring accessibility for the candidates. The results are still awaited, but the tutor and managers, not to mention the candidates, are confident of success for all.

Throughout the programme the college and company worked in partnership to ensure it succeeded. The employer agreed to give paid release to the learners (something which the Preston team always seek to negotiate, if possible) and have helped redesign a poster aimed at learners to make it attractive and relevant to Paragon employees.

Company and college are currently carrying out an analysis of the hard and soft outcomes from the programme, and will continue their relationship as more Paragon employees take part in future projects (a new course begins in February 2004). The company are positive about the business benefits accruing from the programme; the participants were well motivated during the course and continue to be – they found it a useful team building opportunity and the tutor reports that it was one of the best she had ever run – and the quality of report writing has palpably improved, with morale also high.

Views of Customers/Partners

- 6.1 As recorded above, key partners were members of the Steering Group, through which their views were expressed and minuted. As recorded above, tutors regularly took the views of learners and employers while developing and delivering the programme, modifying or adapting content as appropriate in response. Furthermore, internal moderation within team meetings centred on the views of learners and of their managers, which were fed back as part of the process.

Section Seven: ICT, Equal Opportunities and Sustainability

- 7.1 ICT was used to support the management of the project. The programme provided basic IT training linked to basic skills, and the project team used IT diagnostic tools and to support learning.
- 7.2 Equal Opportunities is embedded in all Preston College's activities, in the form of an Equal Opportunities policy, which covers commitment to equality of opportunity in staff/personnel appointment and management, complaints and grievance procedures, and ensuring participation in the project is not limited by disability, family responsibilities, ESOL needs. The project was managed in accordance with this policy.
- 7.3 The work of the project to increase participation in learning by groups in the workforce amongst whom participation rates are low directly addressed equal opportunities policies. The project supported provision for workers in smaller enterprises, part time/temporary contract workers, workers in elementary occupations, women with young children, people with disabilities and certain ethnic groups. Learner data shows participation was broadly in line with demographics in the companies involved.
- 7.4 The Workplace Basic Skills team will now begin two new projects whose methodologies are similar to this one. ESF funding has given the team a set of hard outcomes to demonstrate the effectiveness of the approach, and valuable experience of marketing and delivering such a programme in SMEs, and it has facilitated the development and production of a good deal of new or updated teaching materials; links to the LSC Brokerage scheme have provided a useful contact base from which to build.

Section Eight: Project Management

- 8.1 The Management Team reviewed the project monthly, examining finance, recruitment and achievement against profile, provided oversight and direction, and it sought also to identify good practice. The rest of the delivery team too performed well and mutually supportively, using team meetings as moderation opportunities and to review progress. Project records are comprehensive and informative, and all computer programmes are backed up by hard copy archives.
- 8.2 It is worth noting that the project recently received a successful audit from the LSC.

Additionality

- 8.3 There can be little doubt that candidates under this project would not otherwise have enrolled and achieved accreditation. This is because there is no comparable other programme in existence, and because without ESF funding the work carried out would have been outwith the scope of activity for which Preston College receives mainstream funding. The project brought into learning and assessment significant numbers of non-traditional learners.