

Preston College

Workplace Training Services Department

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

IT in Engineering

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, IT in Engineering, which sought to develop a training network to equip lower skilled workers in the engineering sector with IT skills. The project involved partnership between Preston College Workplace Training Services Department (Direct Delivery Team), the Engineering Partnership, Lancashire and Lancaster Chamber of Commerce, and later, the University of Central Lancashire.
- 1.2 The project was to have begun in September 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 supported skills for competitiveness in a sector that is particularly important for the Lancashire economy, with engineering and related activity employing some 125,000; this sector increasingly requires a higher skilled and IT competent workforce. The project contributed to ESF Policy Field 3, Measure 2 and to LSC Lancashire priorities –
- to raise the demand by employers for skilled people, to increase skills investment and improve workforce development capacity,
 - to develop and sustain Sectoral and geographic networks;
 - to ensure the use of ICT is inherent in all relevant learning and that there is support for the development of the infrastructure to support such learning; and
 - to increase the number of people with employment skills, particularly those reflecting the changing needs of employers, such as ICT, management, and the environment

Project aims and objectives

- 1.4 The project aimed to support 25 SMEs in the Engineering/Manufacturing sector and develop skills in IT for 150 of their unskilled workers, and improve their ability to face business challenges through referencing skills development to business needs, and working with them to deliver training and support future workforce development.

1.5 It sought to achieve this by

- Working with the Engineering Partnership, Lancashire and with Lancaster Chamber of Commerce to identify workforce IT skill needs in 25 engineering/manufacturing SMEs
- Developing training in these SMEs, and working with them to make sure there would be support in the workplace for learners
- Promoting learning, including via tasters, and recruiting learners, on a rolling basis
- Supporting workplace, flexible learning, based on a programme of 60 hours on average, tailored to individual need and leading to NVQ2
- Developing continuing learning plans with the individual learners and the SMEs

Evaluation Methodology

1.6 The evaluator attended a number of meetings with the project manager, and a separate one with the Direct Delivery 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 planned methodology for the project was a simple one – having identified and signed up a company for the project, tutors from the college team would meet with managers to explain the programme, draw up an informal company skills needs audit and identify appropriate learners from amongst the workforce. Tutors would then identify the skills needs of individuals and draw up an individual learning plan; learning would include bite sized provision, and learning tasters where necessary to avoid daunting non-traditional and inexperienced learners, and the individually tailored programmes would generally involve some 60 hours of supported learning, based on the START IT and ECDL qualifications, but flexibly delivered. Delivery was at the workplace and organised so as not to impact on company productivity, which meant fitting in around shift patterns, and some evening and weekend delivery.
- 2.2 The partnership with the Engineering Partnership, Lancashire offered a useful means of gaining access to SMEs in the sector, that were primed and willing to participate. This obviated the need for cold calling and time consuming explanatory meetings and would allow the project team to begin work with the company soon after initial contact.
- 2.3 Unfortunately the Engineering Partnership, Lancashire ceased operations suddenly in April, representing a major set back and necessitating a range of recruitment activity not anticipated in the original bid. The project team was able to use word of mouth referrals to identify some potential participants, the Lancashire Chamber provided some contacts, and internal contacts at Preston College identified others. The tutor team followed up these leads by telephone and where successful set up briefing meetings with the managers involved, with a view to recruitment.
- 2.4 In addition Preston College was able to link up with the University of Central Lancashire, via an ERDF project, ‘Click North West’, which aimed to encourage SMEs to utilise ICT and web-based technologies. The Preston College details were entered onto the Click Website, the aim being to identify Engineering companies responding to Click publicity and use this entry point as a means of recruiting them to the project. In return the college fed back to UCLAN details of beneficiaries emerging from this route. In the event, the approach did not produce participants, but it is a good example of innovation and imagination in using existing contacts and other available resources and funding streams to support the delivery of a project.
- 2.5 The original targets for this project were to involve 25 SMEs, and to draw up training plans, and deliver training, for 150 individuals. However, because of the delay in starting, which was exacerbated by the demise of the Engineering Partnership, Lancashire, the targets were reprofiled, in consultation with and the agreement of LSC

Lancashire in October and November of 2003; the new targets were 12 and 80 respectively. By December 2003, the end of the project, 5 companies had been recruited and signed up as participants, 50 candidates had begun learning, with 37 having completed and 13 having left early.

- 2.6 Despite what may be a modest achievement compared with the original targets, the project has nevertheless achieved its non-numerical aims and objectives, that is, to support SMEs in the Engineering/Manufacturing sector and develop skills in IT for their unskilled workers, and improve their ability to face business challenges through referencing skills development to business needs, and working with them to deliver training and support future workforce development.
- 2.7 Again, leaving the numbers to one side the project has achieved its objectives
- To work with the Engineering Partnership, Lancashire and with Lancaster Chamber of Commerce to identify workforce IT skill needs in engineering/manufacturing SMEs
 - To develop training in these SMEs, and work with them to make sure there was support in the workplace for learners
 - To promote learning, including via tasters, and recruit learners, on a rolling basis
 - To support workplace, flexible learning, based on a programme of 60 hours on average, tailored to individual need and leading to NVQ2
 - To develop continuing learning plans with the individual learners and the SMEs
- 2.8 Sections of the report that follow explore the reasons for the numerical shortfall and the mitigating factors.

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, 2.3 and 2.4.

Flexibility to respond to local needs. See Section Three, 3.2, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 3.7

QUESTION TWO

The project did not specifically deliver capacity building activities, although the infrastructural support provided is described in Section Three, 3.5, which will leave those companies involved well placed to offer work place learning in future.

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 and confidence, and analytical skills including problem solving and data analysis.

Section Three: Innovation and Good Practice

- 3.1 This project is littered with innovative approaches and good practice, and it has helped Preston College to develop a flexible model that can go on being developed, adapted and delivered well into the future, to the benefit of many SMEs and individuals, as well as to the college.
- 3.2 The development of individual action plans, for example, ensures that learners embark on programmes to meet their needs, rather than a standard, one-size-fits-all course. In turn such an approach demands considerable skill and flexibility on the part of the tutor in identifying individual skills needs, and in delivering the supported programme to each candidate. The tutor team is to be congratulated for having achieved this and for recognising the key need to engage and retain the commitment of learners by customising provision in this way.
- 3.3 Another way of retaining commitment was the practice of tutors to take responsibility for and stay with learners from the development of the action plan and thereafter throughout the programme, thus enabling learners to build a relationship with tutors and contributing further to the comfort factor so essential for non-traditional learners. In circumstances where a tutor was unable to attend it was their responsibility to organise cover from amongst colleagues.
- 3.4 In the same vein, tutors' support and accessibility went beyond attendance at learning sessions. All learners were provided with the tutor's mobile phone number; all learners were given an individual email account and internet access to communicate with the tutor and to access materials if need be. Tutors actively sought learner feedback on their progress, and liaised with managers on learner progress, issues and problems. Support for the employer was provided through managers' direct access to the Manager of the Dedicated Delivery team.
- 3.5 The project was able to provide more holistic support to learners and employers, contributing to the development of the infrastructure referred to in Section One. For example, where the company had no ICT available for learners, the college team would provide the equipment. Where no dedicated IT room was available, tutors would bring laptops for learners. In one case, where the company expressed concern about the security of the computers provided, the college was able to provide a security cabinet for it. The programmes utilised the most up to date hardware and software, and the tutor team established good relationships with the college technical team to establish robust systems to support the learners.

- 3.6 The emphasis in the project was on responsiveness and flexibility. As reported above, care was always taken to avoid impact on productivity, which involved delivery at a variety of times, and considerable commitment on the part of tutors and learners alike, but there are other examples of how this approach worked. In one company the tutor drawing up the individual action plan with the learners recognised basic skills needs amongst the candidates, so involved a colleague to help build in basic skills learning as part of the IT programme. In cases where redundancy or natural wastage meant that a candidate would leave the job before completion of the programme, tutors were able to fast track candidates; there was always the opportunity to review and revise learning plans where conditions required it.
- 3.7 In addition, tutors were constantly reviewing and developing teaching materials, in response to learner need and in an attempt to continue to ensure programmes were fully relevant to learners, perhaps by referring to a particular system or procedure in place, or to terminology current in the company. All training materials are Microsoft Office compatible so that learners could, if they wish, transfer them to home PCs.
- 3.8 A particularly welcome example of good practice relates to quality assurance regime operated by the tutor team. The college instigated a rolling programme of session observations by colleagues as a means of internal verification – the moderator would also take the views of learners and managers to satisfy himself that the tutor’s work was up to standard.
- 3.9 Also highly positive has been the commitment of the employers to the programme, to the extent that they contributed in kind, through either paid release for learners or a quid pr quo arrangement whereby employer and employee would each give half the time.
- 3.10 The project has enabled the WTSD to develop a comprehensive database that goes beyond the standard college MI system and offers a complete learner tracking facility, including, in addition to standard characteristic and registration details, candidate learning history, individual action plans and so on.

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 The main lessons emerging, however, relate first to the engineering/manufacturing sector and the importance of up to date labour market and economic data. The project was predicated on information compiled some years ago, since when the sector has shrunk significantly; project workers found far fewer engineering companies, and far fewer employees, than the LMI had led them to expect, and this has been a contributory factor in the below profile outcomes of the project – quite simply, the pool from which to recruit potential participants was so much smaller.
- 4.3 Clearly related to this was the sudden and unexpected demise of the Engineering Partnership, Lancashire, which made identification and recruitment of SMEs that much more difficult. Hindsight tells us that one should not put all ones eggs in the same basket, and future similar projects will ensure a multi-route methodology for recruitment.
- 4.4 Both of the foregoing points link across to another key lesson – that a project such as this requires a large amount of lead and development time. Project team members spent a considerable amount of time contacting companies, visiting and briefing managers, before converting contact to interest, interest to commitment and commitment to action, with some dropout on the way; a future similar project should rear end load its profiled outcomes to take this into account.
- 4.5 While the training itself was well designed and successfully delivered, the project team have recognised the need in any similar future project for two significant changes over this one; first, it would be helpful to broaden the occupational focus. The methodology applied in this project in the engineering sector could equally well apply to SMEs in others, and a future programme need not be so exclusive. Second, such a project need not be limited to IT training, but the portfolio of offerings could be broadened to include a range of learning and qualifications, so that the college could offer a full solution to company training needs.
- 4.6 Finally, under this project there were no arrangements in place for the team to complete the course for those learners who left the company mid-programme, and a future project should explore the potential for this; there are precedents within other teams in the Workplace Training Services Department.

Section Five

Dissemination of Good Practice, Publicity

Good Practice

- 5.1 Through the Manager of Dedicated Delivery, the project's outcomes and good practice have been widely disseminated, internally to other college departments, and externally to local Chambers of Commerce, the Training Partnership, via the Union Learning Club's website and the College's Web – CT (which also provides down loadable resources for post-course achievers, and case studies).
- 5.2 The Workplace Services Training Department also has strong links to Unifi, which is soon to merge with Amicus; this will facilitate dissemination to the Engineering Section of Amicus.

Publicity

- 5.4 No publicity materials were developed specifically for this project – as recorded above recruitment was done at a personal level via the routes described. However, also as recorded, the project did link to an ERDF Project, Click North West, managed by UCLAN, a copy of their publicity brochure is attached.

Section Six: Case Study and Views of Customers/Partners

Case Study

ALFER ENGINEERING

This small engineering company employs some 35 people, working in two shifts per day.

Having identified this company as a potential participant the Dedicated Delivery Team met with managers and were immediately impressed at their willingness to recognise skill shortages in the workforce, a key element of gaining the company's commitment. The team very quickly established a rapport with the workforce, who they also found to be committed and eager to improve their IT skills.

The informal skills needs survey identified a variety of training needs, and the team were able to construct a flexible programme leading to the ECDL qualification; they gave a presentation to workers outlining what would be involved and stressing the responsibility of individuals to participate fully. But this session was also used to take learners' views on how the programme should be constructed and delivered, and consultation and checking back with the learner cohort remained a regular feature of the programme in Alfer, and contributed greatly to the ongoing commitment and involvement of learners.

The skills needs survey also showed that at least some employees needed additional support with English, mainly on pronunciation, grammar, punctuation and so on. The team put on two English courses addressing these topics, but in an IT context to avoid embarrassment and stigmatisation.

The individually supported training was delivered on-site, but at the beginning of the project there was no purpose built learning centre. The commitment of company managers and learners was demonstrated here, when a room was identified and shop floor workers helped to prepare and decorate it, in colours of their choosing, with their own choice of wall pictures, and to equip it with furniture. The company and college IT people co-operated to ensure computer equipment was available and suitable for the learning. This approach succeeded in securing the ownership and further enthusiasm amongst the learners, which continues to the present day.

Because having gone through the programme and achieved their ECDL, the workers were eager for more. When the programme completed, the Direct Delivery team carried out a further skills needs survey, and as a result have developed a more advanced IT course for them, covering more sophisticated and complex uses of IT, including digital photography, advanced word processing and so on.

There are many features of this company's participation that warrant highlighting and dissemination.

- The commitment of the company, and its willingness to recognise workforce skills needs, and to allow employees to influence the content and delivery times of the programme. The commitment was further demonstrated by its financial contribution, in the form of paid time off, to learning. Alfer are delighted at the outcomes of the programme, and with the continuing taste for learning amongst the workforce.
- The commitment and enthusiasm of the workforce, in contributing to the preparation of the learning centre, and participating in the development of the programme. Their further commitment in giving up their time to study, post night shift and at home.
- The commitment of learners is particularly positive – informal discussions revealed that many had had bad experiences in formal education, yet despite this they were fully prepared to try again. And the fact that a new advanced programme has begun is testimony to that commitment and to the professionalism of the tutors.
- The effectiveness of the approach adopted by the Direct Delivery team, which embraced full and genuine consultation with learners over their needs, the use of imaginative and innovative ways of constructing a tailor made programme, involving individual learner support, bite-sized, easily digestible chunks of learning and including basic skills provision, and their dedication to the programme in working unsocial hours in order to deliver the support at a time and place that suited the learners. The programme has succeeded in getting workers qualified, but has also broadened their horizons and helped them to become more flexible and better equipped to meet the challenges of the future.

Views of Customers/Partners

- 6.1 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, the internal verification process described centred on the views of learners and of their managers, which were fed back as part of the moderation process.
- 6.2 Throughout the project the team liaised closely with Engineering Partnership Lancashire until its demise and with the Chamber and UCLAN, although there have been no formal recordings of the content or outcome of such communication.

Section Seven: ICT, Equal Opportunities and Sustainability

- 7.1 ICT was, of course, the very basis upon which the project was predicated. As recorded above, it contributed to ESF Policy Field 3, Measure 2 and to LSC Lancashire priorities –
- to ensure the use of ICT is inherent in all relevant learning and that there is support for the development of the infrastructure to support such learning; and
 - to increase the number of people with employment skills, particularly those reflecting the changing needs of employers, such as ICT, management, and the environment
- 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 facilitate access to and participation in learning by groups in the workforce whose participation rates are low (workers in smaller enterprises, part time/temporary contract workers, workers in elementary occupations, women with young children, people with disabilities and certain ethnic groups and older males) directly addressed equal opportunities policies. Candidate data shows participation was broadly in line with demographics in this sector.
- 7.4 ESF Funding has provided the seed corn from which a range of future activities will grow. It has first of all enabled the Direct Delivery team to develop a methodology and approach which are tailored to company and individual needs, and the outcomes show that it has been successful in delivering appropriate skills and qualifications to learners. The project has supported the development of a wide range of course materials, and has spawned ideas for further development and refinement (broader Sectoral based approach, the inclusion of additional skills/qualifications in the package to provide a more holistic support offer) that should result in wider take up.
- 7.5 Furthermore, the project has enabled the team to make contact with SMEs, including micro businesses, with whom it is confident that similar outcomes can be achieved, and has provided valuable experience in operating in this marketplace, which leaves it well set to respond to the increasing emphasis on Work Based Training.

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 to supplement formal moderation arrangements described above 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 the work place delivery and customised programmes facilitated by this project, employers and employees would simply not have participated.