

Bradford Higher Level Skills Project Report

West Yorkshire Lifelong Learning Network

The Final Report of the Bradford Higher Level Skills Project funded by WYLLN Between January 2010
and May 2011.



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Introduction and Project Context

The West Yorkshire Lifelong Learning Network (WYLLN) was established in 2007 as part of a national programme of LLNs with funding for three years from the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

The WYLLN's aim is to "strengthen the performance of West Yorkshire businesses and the regional economy through improved vocational and work-based progression of young people and adults into and through higher education".

The WYLLN's primary focus from the start and throughout has been upon addressing the higher level skills agenda and it has done this by developing curricula, progression routes, services, products and network infrastructures that aim to meet to the needs of vocational learners and businesses.

Over the last three years WYLLN has engaged with over 3,000 businesses. The overwhelming message coming out of those interactions has been that business does not understand the Higher Level Skills "offer" i.e. what services/products the Higher Education (HE) sector provides or could provide which are specifically designed for and aimed at the business and/or the work-based learner markets e.g. Continuous Professional Development(CPD) in the form of short to medium duration courses, accredited or non-accredited learning, professional training or accreditation services to support existing employer skills development etc.

Alongside this, discussions and partnership working with Business Link at regional, sub-regional and local levels suggested that the knowledge level and breadth of many Business Link advisers in regard to higher level skills and the HE sector was fairly limited. Analysis of skills needs identified and referral data from Business Link at sub-region and local authority area suggested limited brokerage activity taking place in relation to higher level skills.

The above prompted the WYLLN during mid-2009 to reflect on what actions it might take both at a strategic and operational level to address the issues identified. The WYLLN was keen to find a way to add value to the existing business engagement activities of partner institutions and stakeholders, whilst taking care to avoid duplication of service and creating another layer of bureaucracy.

At this time, two putative, but significant strategic developments were beginning to take shape. Firstly the establishment of Employment and Skills Board's (ESB's) within each of the five local authorities districts within West Yorkshire each with the statutory requirement to produce a three



year Work and Skills Plan covering the period of April 2010 to March 2014; and secondly in the late Autumn of 2009, the launch of the Leeds City Region.

The Leeds City Region Partnership would bring together the eleven local authorities of Barnsley, Bradford, Calderdale, Craven, Harrogate, Kirklees, Leeds, Selby, Wakefield and York, along with North Yorkshire County Council to work toward the common aim of a “prosperous and sustainable city region” by working together in areas such as transport, skills, housing, spatial planning and innovation.

These two developments would provide both infrastructure and strategy directives against which WYLLN could position and further develop its higher level skills business engagement strategy and practice.

Following discussion with, local councillors and officers within each of the five West Yorkshire local authorities, Business Link, Leeds City Region representatives and with WYLLN partner institutions the WYLLN Board approved the funding for five Higher Level Skills Coordinators.

Each of the five Higher Level Skills Coordinators would be placed with a selected partner organisation in each District dependent upon local needs, infrastructure and strategic and/or operational priorities.

Higher Level Skills Co-ordination in Bradford

Bradford had identified skills as one of three transformational priorities for the district, with strong political and partner support a vision was agreed “that by 2020 the creativity and skills of our well educated, well trained people will ensure we can compete in global markets”. As a result, the College, University of Bradford and the Council took a strategic lead on higher level skills and employment in the district, working with partners, funding agencies and delivery organisation’s to support the delivery of the district’s transformational priority.

The City Bradford Metropolitan District Council (CBMDC), partnering with the University of Bradford and Bradford College, looked to establish a Higher Level Skills Champion

To progress this priority and goal, the College and University of Bradford, with funding from the WYLLN sought two 0.5 secondments, one from the College and one from the University of Bradford to take on the role of Higher Level Skills Co-ordinator (HLSC) for Bradford based with the Skills and Employment Team within the Economic Development Service at BMDC.



The overarching task of the HLSC(s) was to take forward the key actions/objectives of the Employment and Skills Board, their role being to assist the Council to deliver on the transformational priority to increase higher level skills, and to increase the demand for higher level skills provision amongst employers in Bradford. In addition they were to promote the value of higher level skills as a response to the recession and work to ensure the district had the higher level skills base to take advantage of recovery.

The HLSCs for Bradford were to have the following outcomes:

- 5 work place progression agreements (12 achieved)
- 2 Employer Based Training Agreement (EBTA) initiatives (2 proposals developed – employers declined on grounds of public sector restructuring)

In addition to these hard outcomes, the overall benefit of the HLSCs was:

- to develop improved relationships between higher education providers and the business community through the work of the council's Economic Development Service;
- to contribute to the delivery of Bradford's approach to the City Region Multi Area Agreement (MAA); and
- to contribute to the value added and sustainability of the emerging employment and skills infrastructure of the Bradford District.

The HLSC's would therefore be responsible for relationship management with key agencies such as the University of Bradford, Bradford College, and West Yorkshire Lifelong Learning Network.

In particular the Higher Level Skills Co-ordinator (HLSC) would provide the lead role in supporting the private sector led Employment and Skills Board (ESB) and its operational sub group the Employment and Skills Partnership.

The ESB is responsible for shaping an employment and skills system which works for Bradford and meets the needs and ambitions of the economy, local employers and the people that reside in the district. The board provides independent leadership in this agenda through senior private sector representation, and offers a challenge to funding bodies and providers to ensure they are responding to the needs of employers and the economy.

With an emphasis upon higher level skills, and facilitating the relationship between higher education providers and employers, the HLSC's were to support the development of the partnerships, contributing to a Work and Skills Plan for the district, and ensuring such activity was translated into actions to address the higher level skills needs of Bradford.



The HLSC was also to provide a support and development role for the Leeds city region Skills and Labour Market Panel, working directly with Council leaders and others from the eleven local authorities that make up the city region.



Local Arrangements

In order to fulfil the more strategic objectives of the HLSC role the post holders were placed with the new Employment and Skills Team within the Economic Development Service of the Council in close proximity to those officers directly responsible for employment and skills policy in the district.

The post holders were to report into the Employment and Skills Manager who was responsible for the support of the local Employment and Skills Board / Partnership and were to be based in the Jacobs Well building in the centre of Bradford.

Initial Project brief

The initial project brief was to work with the local partners (Bradford Council, College, University, ESB, ESP and businesses to develop improved relationships between higher education providers and the business community through the on-going work of the council's Economic Development Service.

In addition, the HLS's were to make a contribution to the delivery of Bradford's approach to the City Region MAA and to support the value added and sustainability of the emerging employment and skills infrastructure of the Bradford District.

Further to the broad strategic aims the HLSC's were to work with employers to develop five work place progression agreements and two Employer Based Training Agreements.

Project Operational Plan

The initial project plan for the Higher Level Skills Co-ordinators included four key areas of activity; Support for Bradford Employment and Skills Board, Key Account management, Higher Level skills Partnerships, and Graduate Level Job retention.

Bradford Employment and Skills Board support

- Support the ESB re planning and driving forward Higher Level Skills initiatives
- Contribute to the ESB's initial strategy and policy development in relation to HLS and employment issues, inc ESB 5 strategic objectives: SME, Finance Jobs, Grads/HLS, Apprenticeships, 1000 new jobs
- Develop a funded forward plan of actions to improve HLS coordination



Key Account Management

- Provide a detailed understanding of the changing National skills funding environment and ensure local employers/partners can capitalise from opportunities on offer
- Ensure local employers/partners can take advantage of recession response initiatives, i.e. ECIF
- Work with key sectors, projects and masterplans to increase HLS development in the workplace
- Provide initial information and advice on the HE landscape and offer within W Yorks to employers and intermediary networks e.g. courses, Knowledge transfer Partnerships (KTP), research
- To broker initial contacts between employers and HE providers
- Ensure employers benefit from the flexible opportunities created by the work of WYLLN Sector Groups
- Create opportunities for the accreditation of employers in-house training (Employer Based Training Accreditation (EBTA))
- Create formal progression opportunities and agreements for Bradford employees

Higher Level Skills Partnerships

- Work in partnership with key stakeholders in Bradford to develop a coordinated approach to employer engagement
- To work with the WYLLN Sector Officer and other Higher Education groups to enable the exchange of Labour Market Information, intelligence and curriculum information
- To work with HE staff to increase their awareness and understanding of the role and activities of BMDC's Economic Development Service
- To inform the development of HE provider employer engagement strategies
- To provide market intelligence to HE providers in Bradford
- To advise HE providers on CPD requirements relating to the employer engagement agenda
- Input to Leeds City Region Forerunner Status



- Take a role in delivering Bradford's response to the Leeds City Region MMA (HLS)

Graduate level employment & retention

- Assist in work to increase retention & improve graduate employment rates through relevant work experience and skills development

Working practice/processes

Joint working initiatives

“Working Together” initiative

Collaboration was very much at the heart of Higher Level Skills coordination in Bradford. Over time, much good practice has developed within the district and there is a groundswell of expertise and experience in employment and skills. However, the HE perspective has not had a high profile and therefore this activity gave colleagues the opportunity to broaden their own understanding of the Bradford HE offer. Much time and effort was spent successfully pulling together various departments, organisations and community groups from across Bradford to facilitate the Higher Level Skills activity. What was termed the “Working Together” initiative made great strides in bringing into one room Business Link, Bradford Council Inward Investment and Local Impact teams, University and College representatives.

Working Neighbourhoods Fund – Graduates and Professionals Gateway

The Bradford team created a programme of activity and full bid for funding to the Working Neighbourhood Fund held by Bradford Council. The activity was to support the strategic objectives of the Employment and Skills Board around graduate jobs and employability. The aim of the Gateway was to provide graduates and professionals with the skills to find, keep and progress their graduate level employment, self employment and skills and included elements such as:

- Delivery of an Information, Advice and Guidance and Career Development Service to all eligible graduates and professionals, opening up the range of specialist labour market and recruitment resources currently offered to University and College students to the wider population of Bradford who may be non Bradford graduates or may never have engaged in HE. Experienced, impartial HE staff were to explore career options and provide information designed to increase levels of employment and higher level skills.
- Increasing Self awareness: personal effectiveness evaluation, audit of development of personal and professional skills.
- Review and understanding of the key employability skills and strategies, self reflection: challenging own aspirations, goal setting and action planning, progress review and reflection



- Advanced knowledge and skills of organisational behaviour and self-management in the work place.
- Increase understanding of key concepts and to give an opportunity for development of relevant skills, i.e. enterprise skills and entrepreneurial practice in a 'risk-free' environment
- Understand the extensive labour market for graduates and what recruiters are looking for in their prospective employees. To proactively apply this knowledge to all applications and to be able to compete confidently in the competitive graduate labour market.
- Explore opportunities for enterprise and signposting to support services to drive innovation and new enterprise, particularly through innovative University and College programmes, Business Link and LEI funded activity

Whilst the activity was initiated by the Employment and Skills Board and HLSC dedicated much resource to ensuring a robust bid was submitted, regrettably the funding crisis curtailed activity. The Local Authority had to freeze and reassess use of the WNF funding and all activity ceased. The programme plan remains however, and represents great strides in the area of joint delivery between Bradford College and Bradford University. Should funding become available in future the robust design and delivery elements of the bid are ready prepared for submission.

Working with Professional Bodies

The Bradford Higher Level Skills Coordinators facilitated a successful bid for funding from the Royal Academy of Engineering HE STEM programme. The funding bid is now enabling development of specific materials to support transition from FE to HE for Engineering students. This builds on the initial WYLLN "Trans it" programme which provided general transition support, now enabling specific sector needs such as Maths to be addressed as part of the student support package. The ultimate aim is to provide students with the skills to access and be successful in HE.

This embeds previous WYLLN activity but also sustains the good practice developed. The materials developed using STEM and WYLLN funding will be available beyond the end of the project and therefore there is a legacy to this work. This approach is essential in the current economic climate as capitalising on the learning from both Trans it projects will give the institutions a resource to call on beyond May 2011.

Policy contribution

Higher Level Skills coordinator activity in Bradford has been particularly effective in contributing to policy at local and regional levels. There is a long history of good practice and focus on lower and entry level skills in the Bradford District. Whilst this focus has been necessary to address the high number of citizens with skill levels below Level 2, it nevertheless detracts time and resource away from building on the excellent home student records of both the College and the University. The role of the HLSCs has enabled WYLLN to work at both Local Authority and City Region level to influence skills and employment policy as well as providing a source of information and guidance for policy



makers. Raising the profile of the institutions amongst key local and regional stakeholders has been of enormous value, for example, ensuring that higher level skills are considered and fully represented in both the City Region and Bradford District Skills Strategies gives visibility to the economic contribution the institutions can make. It also ensures the “HE offer” is made at a strategic level to both public and private sector partners, supporting institutional corporate objectives around employer engagement. As employer engagement is a high priority for both Bradford College and Bradford University this WYLLN activity has dovetailed and a partnership approach to embedding has emerged.

The Bradford HE providers will continue this work as it is an important element of ongoing strategy, but without the direct link through the HLSC it will be much more difficult to maintain the breadth and quality of relationships. It is the quality of these new relationships which has enabled innovative practice and sustainability is therefore much more difficult without funding.

However, joint working on the “Higher Level Skills in Bradford position paper” creates a legacy for the policy element of the Bradford team. Now that working relationships have been formed between the funding agencies, Local Authority, Leeds City Region and HE institutions the circumstances exist for all parties to capitalise on their combined knowledge and expertise.

Partner workshops and presentations

Bradford Coordinators played a major part in developing and delivering the very successful Higher Level Skills staff development event “Getting Engaged for Delivery” at Huddersfield in November 2010.

The session disseminated lessons learned from all five HLSC projects and was well attended by colleagues from across West Yorkshire with representation from Leeds City Region, the Local Authorities, HE institutions and employers. The workshops delivered were interactive by design to showcase the vast knowledge and expertise gathered by all coordinators in the course of the projects.

The “Story Circles” format was particularly useful in drawing out common themes from delegates and then using coordinator experience to up-skill colleagues. Peer to peer learning was a vital element of the event, but is also representative of the approach of the Bradford project as a whole – taking what we all know individually and creating a whole much bigger than the sum of its parts.

Marketing and Communications

No budget was available for major promotion of the service and therefore marketing materials were limited to a small tri-fold business card produced by WYLLN, designed by the broader HLSC team alongside an A4 brochure developed by Bradford College on behalf of the project team. However, existing WYLLN marketing material was available, such as sector booklets, and coordinated CPD publications etc.



The main vehicle used to promote services to business was via the personal engagement between the HLSC and the networks available within their specific areas, for example, chamber networks, council key accounts, Business Link, Leeds City Region groups, manufacturing alliances, training networks and WYLLN sector groups etc.

Ways of working

Early on in the delivery of the project the need for more transparent communications and sharing of intelligence between the Bradford HLSCs and more broadly across the sub-region was identified as a key issue.

Lacking access to a true customer relationship management system (CRM) and the prospects of one being available, the broader HSLC team adopted the use of Google Docs with a common spread sheet being used to capture headline business engagements. More detail was later captured on a system of tracking documents including:

- Contact sheet containing details of the organisation, sector, outline of discussions, potential services of interest, actions required and deadlines for actions to be completed. All subsequent contacts being recorded in order to track the relationship
- Referral sheet detailing specific opportunities for WYLLN partners to respond to – again stipulating deadline for completion of responses
- EBTA referral sheets for those engagements requesting an EBTA proposal.
- Evaluation sheets for capturing business opinion of the level of service offered by both the HLSC and the WYLLN partners responding to referrals.



Facts and figures

Business Engagements	150
Meaningful Business Engagements	21
Referrals to WYLLN Partners	5
Referral Responses from WYLLN Partners	5
Activity/Contracts Secured by WYLLN Partners	Numerous introductions provided and information shared.
Work Based Progression Agreements	12
Employer Based Training Accreditations	2 proposals developed – employers declined on grounds of public sector restructuring
Contributions to strategic documents/policy	Local employment & skills board policies influenced. LCR employment & skills board policies influenced. Contribution to employment & skills strategy for Bradford. Bradford Higher Level Skills position Paper in drafted.
Contributions to development of bids	WY LSIS STEM Centres bid supported. Working Neighbourhoods Fund Bid developed.
Staff development offered	'Getting Engaged for Delivery' event staged – sharing experiences of HLSC and developing new ways of working. Both Formal and Non-formal staff development input to partners via localised engagement and events. WYLLN Annual Conference workshop – 'Shared Commonalities' Bradford College Higher Education Conference Workshops 'Employer Engagement' Workshops
Employer surveys/focus groups / contact projects undertaken	Bradford skills surveys developed and deployed. Bradford employers of significance project developed Inter-agency joint working meetings organised and chaired



Lessons Learnt

The work of the Bradford co-ordinators over the past seventeen months has revealed a number of practical lessons from an employer and institution perspective with regard to employer engagement with HE.

Employers

From working with employers we have learnt that:

Accreditation has not been in great demand with employers citing costs and lack of a solid business case as barriers. For some the complex and time consuming process can be off putting too.

Foundation Degrees (FD's) have not been not easy to sell to employers, with many still expressing a preference for Higher National Certificate (HNC). Particularly amongst engineering employers who are very familiar with the HNC pathway.

The clear feedback from Chamber of Commerce skills surveys is that employers want skills rather than qualifications, and more over skills tailored to their business needs.

The recession has impacted heavily on the Higher Level Skills accreditation and progression offer, with the employer's willingness to pay being heavily challenged, particularly amongst the public sector and Small to Medium sized Enterprises (SME'S).

The Public and Third sectors have been challenged by public spending cuts and workforce restructuring (through reduction of core funding, removal of grants/contracts and closure) and have chosen to defer a number of workforce skills investment decisions.

Some Institution's full economic recovery model for skills or accreditation projects can prove to be too expensive for businesses to justify.

A significant number of businesses engaged, both those with pre-existing relationships and those without, had strong perceptions that private providers of training are more flexible and more willing to customise their services than those from the public sector and a number consider them to be better value for money.

In addition, several employers fed back that the bureaucracy and related frustrations associated with public funding – Train to Gain etc. was a continuing barrier, though there were positive remarks in respect of the Economic Challenge Investment fund (ECIF)



Many employers also reported being unaware of the full range of services that are being offered by institutions suggesting a significant opportunity to “cross sell” services.

Institutions

From working with HE Institutions we have learnt that:

Corporate priorities in terms of Employer Engagement do not always match the operational realities for academic colleagues who are by and large delivering mainstream undergraduate and post-graduate programmes.

Some academics can be uninterested in being involved employer based activities and some are not suited to this type of activity.

Where engagement infrastructure and dedicated staff exist, this works well, though good progress can be hindered at times due to changes in policy or a refocusing of priorities.

Most institutions in the main lack a working and effective Client Relationship Management (CRM) system and/or agreed response protocols. Where these are lacking, engagement success depends on “centres of energy and interest” within an institution.

Some employers have commented that there is a need for learning ‘credit’ to be more openly interchangeable – i.e. where in-house training can be credited (e.g. via QCF) and where credits obtained from different providers can be combined to show a whole and ideally realise some form of certification.

Response processes and response times have been seen to vary greatly between learning and skills delivery organisations and individual departments within organisations

Higher level Skills Co-ordinators have been able to work closely with the Bradford Council Skills Team to help develop and influence the Bradford Employment and skills strategy, positioning the Higher Level skills agenda within the broader economic development strategies of the city.

Public sector partners and support agencies

Significant activity was undertaken throughout early and mid-2010 to bring together the local and regional support agencies involved in the direct support of businesses and their skills issues.



Joint working initiatives were begun with Bradford Council's Local Impact team and with the skills team of Business Link Yorkshire bringing their staff together with representatives of the University and College to share service offers and encourage cross referral of business clients for the first time.

Influence within and across Institutions

Throughout the project the Higher Level skills co-ordinators undertook a significant amount of staff development activity both within the two Bradford Institutions but also beyond this contributing to wider WYLLN events and workshops. The activities undertaken covered a broad range of employer engagement activity, sharing best practice and employer responses.

Key contacts made

A significant number of relationships have been formed with local employers (see Facts and Figures) which will be sustained by individual institutions going forward, some with embryo skills projects currently in development. Employer contact details have been maintained on a Google Documents database and will be available to the HE Institutions and WYLLN after the closure of the Higher Level Skills Project.

Where Progression Agreements have been made these will continue to be operated into the future by the respective Programme Leaders and Institutions.

During the lifetime of the project, significant contact has been maintained with local partnerships from the private, public and third sectors that have been made aware of the Higher Level Skills offer for their organisation and workforce.

The positioning of Higher Level Skills

The work of the Higher Level Skills Co-ordinators has helped to position Higher Level Skills within the context of both Economic Development, skills policy and planning. This has enabled Higher Level Skills to be embedded in the District's key plans and strategies in a way that may not have been otherwise possible.



Recommendations

Strategic

Institutions may wish to consider:

- developing and implementing clear Employer Engagement Strategies and Plans that are clearly linked to the organisation's Corporate Plan and objectives. Such plans should clearly state what strategic activities the plan supports, what exactly is to be achieved, alongside visible and regular measurement.
- that in putting together such strategies and plans, consideration should be made of the entire scope of employer engagement activity with which the Institution is currently engaged as well as those areas it would wish to enter in the future.
- Developing progression agreements with employers, training providers, professional bodies and community-based providers in order to promote and develop pathways for learners and to strengthen the relationship between institutions and local businesses and organisations.

Operational

Institutions may wish to consider:

- putting in place business engagement infrastructure to provide employers with a single entry and response point to help them understand and access the HE offer for business.
- the deployment of some form of client relationship management system and agreed contact/response protocols to support the delivery and measurement of Employer Engagement activity.
- putting in place clear guidance for staff on best practice in employer engagement, including a clear understanding of the complete HE offer to employers (CPD, accreditation, progression, KTP, provision of placements, enhancement of curriculum) etc.



- developing fulfilment protocols including the involvement of academics that are experienced in business facing activities and have sufficient time to engage in flexible programme design / delivery
- presenting a simple and coherent menu of activity that is jargon free, easy for employers to understand and therefore access.
- implementing clear and transparent pricing policies across their institution making it clear to employers what particular programmes or activities will cost.



Appendices

1. Bradford Employment and Skills Strategy 2011-15
2. Bradford Higher level Skills Position Paper 2011
- 3a Bradford Graduate Programme Final Report
- 3b. Move On up Final report
4. NF Report