

Employer Responsiveness resource pack

Module 4 Partnership building for responsiveness

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Feedback and more information

We hope you find our range of resources practical and informative. Feel free to print and distribute them within your organisation.

Please note that these materials are constantly evolving and should be considered a draft rather than a final product. The Development Programme aims to build on experiences with providers and in turn update materials so that they are relevant and accurate. We welcome your feedback about these resources and will ensure all suggestions are considered for future material updates. Please send your comments to [<traintogain@LSNeducation.org.uk>](mailto:traintogain@LSNeducation.org.uk) or contact us on 0845 071 0800.

If you have useful materials that you would like to share please send these into the same e-mail address.

Introduction

Partnerships and consortia are a common feature in the delivery of Train to Gain. Most providers will be involved in a consortium, as a lead provider and/or a sub-contractor. This module is about building the working relationships that make effective consortia between providers. There are clearly benefits from working with partners, such as extending the skills and knowledge on offer, sharing workloads and responsibilities, and increasing the resources available, but partnerships need clear and shared aims, common working practices and careful management to ensure that there is added value from their collective efforts.

Working as a partner in a consortium is an evolutionary process. It takes time to get to know each other, establish effective ways of working, understand each other's expectations and make real the potential benefits.

This module introduces the ideas behind why and how partnerships can work, including an overview of critical success factors and tools for developing well-grounded strategies. Different types of partnerships are illustrated with quotes and case studies from the Train to Gain Improvement Projects.

For more information about the Improvement Projects and related case studies download *Improvement Projects* from [<www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-22901.aspx>](http://www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-22901.aspx).

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An introduction to the rationale of partnership working and offers some ideas about the different ways in which partnerships work.

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<Setting the scene for partnership working>

Explores the value of SWOT (strengths/weaknesses/opportunities/threats) analysis, taking you through an exploration of the collective strengths and weaknesses of the consortium as a whole and the opportunities and threats that it faces.

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<Keys to success in working in partnerships>

An overview of factors that can make or break a partnership.

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A helpful tool for encouraging well-grounded strategic thinking in contexts ranging from planning the future agenda for the consortium to guiding the marketing effort of a single provider.

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<The progress of partnerships>

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Target audience

This module is written for providers who are part of a consortium but who may be looking for guidance in making partnership working more successful, whether as a lead partner or contractor.

1

Working in partnerships

What drives partnership working?

Organisations with different experiences, skills, values and ways of doing things come together in partnerships in the expectation of offering something more valuable than each can offer independently. There are powerful forces driving this expectation. The government view is that the one of the ways to develop the nation's levels of skill is for providers to work in partnership and many regional Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) encourage partnership working in delivery of the Train to Gain service. The aim is to provide a strong and effective source of training and related services and to give employers access to the widest possible range of provision.

Primarily the consortium was put together for delivering the Train to Gain service, but we now find our working relationship has developed. When we go in to an employer and they ask us for a programme that we don't necessarily have the expertise in, we have partners in the consortium who can deliver it on our behalf, so we are satisfying the needs of the employer and giving them that complete solution.

Manager, work-based learning provider

How do partnerships work?

Networking? Co-existence? Coordination? Cooperation? Collaboration? Or something more radical? What characterises the partnership you are in or are about to join? What can you expect from it?

If you have recently joined a consortium, you (and it) may be in the early stages of working out how you will all work together. If you are relatively new to partnership working, you may also be unfamiliar with the nuances of the options open to you.

First on the list are items that describe the loosest interpretations of partnership working. At the end of the list, you will find statements that describe innovative and radical thinking leading to strategic joint ventures. In-between, the items describe various degrees of cooperation and collaboration, though it is not possible to categorise items with precision.

The benefits of cost savings and presence in the marketplace increase in proportion to the extent to which you and your partners collaborate. If you are a lead partner, the list might inspire you to initiate greater collaboration. If your partnership status is as a contractor, you might want to try persuading the lead partner to look afresh at the partnership agreements. Reflect on the items and tick any that you would like to see implemented. Discuss them with partners to see if you can generate interest in putting them into practice.

For a list of ways of working in partnership download [Ways of working in partnership: checklist](http://www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23541.aspx) from <www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23541.aspx>.

2 Setting the scene for partnership working

If you are lead partner in a newly formed consortium where some partners already have a close working relationship while others are new contractors, what will help you get off to a good start? If you would like to do something really useful that will inform your joint strategic thinking, convene a group representing the partners and start with a SWOT analysis. Using this tool, you will explore your collective strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

For extracts from a SWOT analysis done by a consortium of FE colleges in the West Country download [How to do a SWOT analysis](http://www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23542.aspx) from <www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23542.aspx>.

The SWOT analysis was undertaken by four colleges in the West Country that are the lead partners in a consortium involving 15 private providers and six universities for whom the colleges offer Foundation Degrees. It was an important element in reinforcing their strategic decision to combine their strengths in order to exploit the opportunities and overcome the threats they were all facing. The following extract illustrates some of the factors that they took into consideration.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Individual colleges have high profiles in their local communities ■ Complementary strengths in their provision ■ Entrepreneurial skills evidenced in one college 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ambiguous relationships between them – competing in some areas and collaborating in others ■ Fall-out from failed merger in recent past ■ Two of the principals are newly appointed ■ Ambivalence about reputations
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Employment in the area is growing fast ■ High inward investment ■ Major employers are looking for breadth and depth of provision ■ Provision has to be demand-led 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Demographic changes threaten viability of some traditional FE provision for 16–19 year olds ■ Skills training has to be delivered in a business context, show a return on investment and make a positive impact on local economy ■ Major HE and FE providers in neighbouring counties expanding into the colleges' geographical catchment area. Individually, the colleges do not have sufficient critical mass to compete

3 Keys to success in working in partnerships

What will you bring to the partnership?

If you are the lead partner, other partners will look to you for a strategic vision of how you will all work together. They will expect you to contribute the energy that sets things in motion, such as the means of communication, regular partnership meetings, performance management and quality standards.

You will earn their support and commitment if you:

- make decisions collaboratively and do not claim to have all the answers
- share your expertise
- empower partners to get on with doing what they do best, while holding them to account by monitoring, review and evaluation
- show a genuine desire to support all your partners and seek ways to help them develop.

Support from the lead partner for a very small business

I started out as a one-person business in a consortium where the lead partner is an FE college. When I first joined, they put me through their three-day Information, Advice and Guidance training which broadened what I could offer under the Train to Gain service. When I'm in their area, I can go in and use their facilities. Their admin. team will help me with things like putting portfolios together and checking paperwork. Then there's the support element. I can ring up and speak to the contract manager. I tell her what problems I'm having and she will tell me what to do next and what they can do for me.

What's nice is that it doesn't seem to matter if you're big or small. They say to me 'We're happy to help because we need what you do'. Because I'm a micro business, I fill a niche for them. I'll visit learners on their night shifts or at weekends. So it's a win-win for me and the consortium.

Work-based learning provider

If you are a contractor, you might think that all you have to do is deliver your services. This would be a mistake. Partnership working, whatever your size and role, is about contributing. So whether you are a one-person business or employ a large delivery team, have your say in shaping the vision and get involved in the way the consortium is run. Do not leave it to the lead partner to do all the leading.

What might get in the way of successful partnership working?

If you are the lead partner, it will probably be your responsibility to maintain good working relationships. Use the checklist below as a way of checking that you are aware of some of the pitfalls that can affect partnership working. Highlight the ones that most need attention in your own consortium. If you are a contractor partner, use the list to check whether there are issues that you would like to take up with the lead partner(s).

Download [Possible problems with partnership working: checklist](http://www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23543.aspx) from <www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23543.aspx>.

Case studies

What providers are doing:
smart and simple

Northants Training and Development Partnership (NTDP), lead partner in the Northants Training Group, has set up a referral response system, based on two types of lead.

A **simple lead** is one in which an employer requires training that only one of the partners can deliver. The appropriate partner is asked to contact the employer directly, to deliver the training using its own systems and processes and to manage the relationship. Where more than one partner is able to deliver a piece of training, leads are allocated on a rota basis.

A **complex lead** is one in which an employer’s training will need to be delivered by more than one of the partners. NTDP manages the employer relationship.

Stourbridge College, lead partner in the West Midlands Train to Gain Construction Consortium, has taken a ‘keep it smart, keep it simple’ approach to its role as lead partner. From the outset, the College established clear lines of communication with all partners, communicating new developments as soon as they became aware of them and asking for prompt responses and turnaround of information. The College ran a series of small workshops to help them identify who they needed to speak to when it came to key decision-making: for example, principal or vice-principal. On the operational side, the Stourbridge team found out exactly who was involved in the training delivery and also liaised closely with the marketing teams.

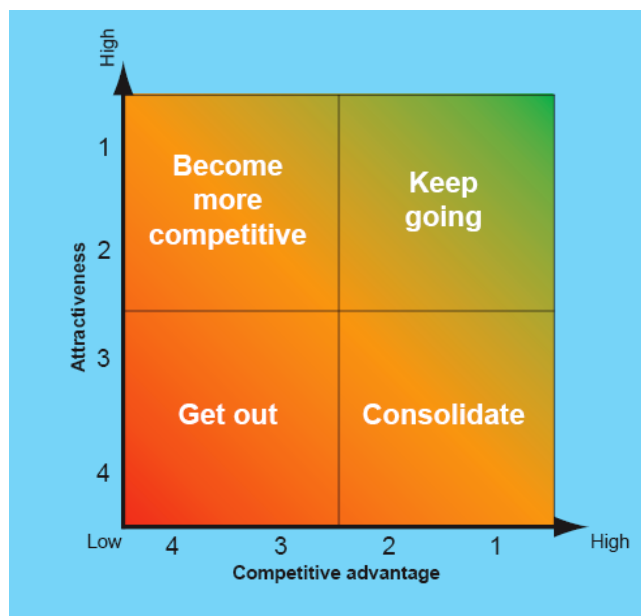
4
Setting the direction

Whether your consortium was put together to deliver the Train to Gain service or has a broader agenda, there may be a strong temptation to pursue all the markets in which the individual partners are currently active. The Directional Policy Matrix is a technique that reveals the competitive strength of the consortium’s operations in specific areas and prevents it trying to be all things to all people.

It is a simple and versatile tool, useful to both large and small groups of partners. The aim is to assess your current position in different sectors of your market and decide what strategy would be appropriate in each case.

For instructions on how to use it download [Instructions for using the Directional Policy Matrix](http://www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23544.aspx) from <www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23544.aspx>.

Instructions for using the Directional Policy Matrix



Using the Directional Policy Matrix

In one FE college, the Director for Employment Engagement mapped the priority market sectors against the curriculum areas in the college. On the basis of this, the governors and later the executive team agreed a new direction for policy and made decisions about staffing and how curriculum areas would work with the Business Development Unit on the new programme for employer engagement.

In another college, the Business Development Unit realised that they were falling behind in achieving their targets under the Train to Gain service. They used the matrix to examine their customer base and to prioritise the businesses they would call.

The marketing department in a third college used the matrix to structure their thinking about potential new customers so that they could target their mailshots, publicity materials and website to gain more business.

These three examples illustrate the potential of the matrix as a tool to address both broad strategic issues and short-term operations in individual colleges. It has the same potential to help partnerships formulate and deliver their strategic plans.

5

The progress of partnerships

When a consortium is formed it embarks on a process of development and will inevitably face some challenges before it functions effectively. Even after it has achieved a high level of performance, it might be disrupted by new circumstances and need to rebuild itself.

The process can be mapped using Tuckman's model ('Developmental sequence in small groups', 1965) in which he described the characteristic stages as Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing. Look at the descriptions of each and compare them with what is happening currently in your consortium partnership. Then pick out the tips that would make most difference. Discuss them with your colleagues and plan the actions needed to make a difference to the way the consortium is working.

Forming

In the early stages of working together, there is a lot of enthusiasm and energy as people take strength from a shared understanding of the opportunities and threats facing them. They are not yet clear what they are committing themselves to.

Storming

When the initial excitement and energy have waned, disputes and tensions begin to emerge and partners may temporarily lose sight of their common cause. Previously hidden agendas and doubts come to the surface and partners begin to compete for power and resources. A partnership is particularly vulnerable to breakdown at this point.

We produced a guide to products and services currently on offer so that staff were well informed when they went to talk to employers. When we discussed this at a consortium meeting, partners realised the value of doing it for their own organisations. So as a group, we produced a 'Provider solutions information sheet' listing what is available from all consortium partners. This is updated monthly. Staff find it useful to refer to when they have identified employers' needs and are discussing ways of meeting them.

Work-based learning provider and partner in a consortium

Norming

'Norming' is a period of consolidation when partners have re-established where they are going and how they are going to get there. They are clearer about their roles and responsibilities and are beginning to think collectively rather than as individuals.

Performing

When a consortium gets to this stage, the partners will be working with energy, enthusiasm and efficiency. They will trust each other to do what needs to be done and will be able to cope with new challenges.

For a checklist with all the tips download [Tips for working at your partnership](http://www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23545.aspx) <www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23545.aspx>.

Contractual arrangements

Behind every successful consortium is a clear understanding of how partners will work together and what is expected of each. Trust is built on a foundation of agreed expectations, systems and procedures encapsulated in a service-level agreement (SLA).

Use [Service-level agreement \(SLA\) checklist](#) – download it from

<www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23546.aspx> – to check the contents of the agreement for your own consortium. If the list includes items that do not feature in your own SLA, highlight them and discuss them at the next consortium meeting.

For more information on SLAs download [Module 1: Working with employers as customers](#) from <www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23558.aspx>.

All the providers in a particular consortium had worked with each other before so a level of trust had already been established. However, before signing any contract the lead partner wanted them to look at how they would work together in future. This was addressed in two ways: a service-level agreement (SLA) established clear and agreed objectives and clarified roles and a separate agreement described how they would operate within Train to Gain.

Reported by a consultant

A useful source of checklists and advice is <www.lgpartnerships.com>, the employers' organisation for local government.

6 A final message

This module has raised some of the issues relating to building working relationships within a consortium of providers. It has invited you to:

- consider the forces driving partnership working and the different ways in which providers collaborate with one another
- use a SWOT analysis to explore what is currently facing the consortium
- construct a matrix showing your assessment of the attractiveness and competitive advantage of the different offerings within your own organisation or within the consortium
- reflect on the way that relationships within the consortium are evolving.

Effective partnerships are built on trust, respect, credibility and satisfaction – in combination with effective systems and process. Be alert to the combination of hard and soft factors that will build success.

Feedback and more information

We welcome your feedback about these resources and will ensure all suggestions are considered for future material updates. Please send your comments to traintogain@LSNeducation.org.uk or contact us on 0845 071 0800.

If you have useful materials that you would like to share please send these into the same e-mail address.

Further reading

Tuckman BW (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychology Bulletin* 63:384–99. Naval Medical Research Institute, Bethesda, MD.

Resources

External resources

A useful source of checklists and advice is www.lgpartnerships.com, the employers' organisation for local government Improvement Projects and related case studies
www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-22901.aspx

Internal resources

Module 1: Working with employers as customers

www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23558.aspx

Ways of working in partnership: checklist

www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23541.aspx

How to do a SWOT analysis

www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23542.aspx

Possible problems with partnership working: checklist

www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23543.aspx

Instructions for using the Directional Policy Matrix

www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23544.aspx

Tips for working at your partnership

www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23545.aspx

Service-level agreement (SLA) checklist

www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23546.aspx

Glossary

www.qiaemployerled.org.uk/search/Resource-23563.aspx