



**Survey of employer need for
higher education in
North Worcestershire**

Final Report

28 April 2010

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The survey was undertaken by Stratagia Limited in collaboration with Vector Research. The results and any opinions presented in this report are the sole responsibility of the researchers.

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Any enquires about the technical aspects of this report and the conduct of the research should be addressed to Nigel Hudson at Stratagia Limited.

e-mail nigel@stratagia.co.uk

tel. 0845 226 171

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1 Introduction, summary and recommendations

1.1 Purpose of report

1.1.1 This report presents the findings from a project to identify the higher level learning needs and preferences of employers in North Worcestershire.

1.1.2 It also provides details of the work undertaken to deliver these findings. This includes copies of the research instruments used in the project.

1.2 Summary of findings

- very small business predominate, with about two-thirds (66%) having five or fewer employees
- less than a quarter (22%) of employers reported having any higher level learning and development needs
- this proportion rose to a third (34%) for businesses with more than ten employees
- these higher level needs were most frequently reported in education, business & financial services, health & social welfare and ICT
- the most commonly reported area of development need related to management and leadership, cited by about one in eight (13%) of employers
- the total number of people that would benefit from higher level learning and development support was estimated to be 14,800
- more than half of employers (53%) said they only had one or two such potential learners; this highly dispersed market poses a challenge for providers
- spending on learning and development was modest with just over half (52%) of employers reporting no such expenditure in the previous year
- most employers wanted support provided in the workplace (64%) and during normal working hours (76%)

- local colleges were the most commonly identified potential providers (59%) but more than a quarter of employers cited a local university, an industry or professional body and private training providers
- over half of employers (55%) said they would be willing to offer student work placements in future, almost as many (47%) were interested in apprenticeships and just over a third (35%) were willing to consider offering graduate internships
- the main reasons cited by those not interested in participating in such schemes was a lack of business benefit (34%), lack of time for supervision (32%) and cost (25%)
- almost half of employers (49%) were not members of a business organisation; those that were had membership of a wide range of organisations and most commonly either the Federation of Small Businesses or a trade or industry body.
- preferred methods by which educational institutions could inform employers of what they had to offer were diverse and included e-mail (48%), printed newsletters (33%), website (32%) and contacting employers directly (32%).

1.3 Activity

1.3.1 The project included:

- a telephone survey of 200 North Worcestershire employers
- pre-survey interviews with five employers and three representatives of business membership and support organisations in the area. These were primarily intended to contribute to the development of the telephone survey questionnaire
- post-survey interviews with eight more local employers. These aimed to complement the original interviews and provide further detailed insights into issues identified from the survey.

2 Research results

2.1 Source

2.1.1 The following results are based primarily on the survey. However we have sought to integrate insights from the in-depth interviews where appropriate.

2.2 Describing employers in North Worcestershire

2.2.1 The overwhelming majority (84%) of employers are in the private sector. Far smaller proportions are in the public (13%) or voluntary and community sectors (3%). However we are only looking here at the share of enterprises; employment will be rather less concentrated in the private sector.

2.2.2 The businesses were dispersed across a wide range of industries. The most commonly occurring business represented in the area were manufacturing and engineering (18%), retail and wholesale (18%) and construction (10%). Fuller results are presented in table 1.

Table 1 Employers by industry

<i>Industry</i>	<i>%</i>
Agriculture	2.7
Engineering	7.6
Other manufacturing	10.8
Construction	11.0
Retail and wholesale	17.5
Hospitality	8.4
Leisure	2.5
Transport	3.0
ICT	1.7
Arts, design and media	5.6
Business and financial services	7.9
Education	1.1
Health & social welfare	5.4
Other	14.7

Base: 200. This is the base for all subsequent tables unless specifically reported otherwise.

2.2.3 Almost two-thirds (66%) of employers were very small, with zero to five employees. Just under 5% had fifty or more employees and so could be categorised as medium-sized or large employers.

2.2.4 Given the small size of most employers it is not surprising that for the vast majority (84%) all their employees were based in Worcestershire.

2.2.5 The results from our survey suggest the numbers of employees in the area in occupational roles that may require higher level learning are as follows:

Table 2 Occupational distribution of employees

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>number</i>
Director or senior manager	7,450
Managers or team leaders	4,948
Professional staff	6,981
Technicians or associate professional staff	3,397

2.2.6 Almost half of all employers were not members of a business, trade or professional body. Those that were members were affiliated with a diverse range of business organisations.

Table 3 Member of business organisation

	%
Federation of Small Businesses	16
Trade or industry body	16
Chamber of Commerce	9
Professional body	9
Forum for Private Business	1
Other organisation	13
None	49

2.2.7 A substantial minority of employers who participated in the survey were also prepared to engage further with this work. 43% were willing to be interviewed in more detail, 42% were happy for their contact details to be passed to local colleges and universities and 35% wanted to receive a summary of the research results.

2.3 Learning and development needs

- 2.3.1 Employers were asked to identify the main higher level learning and development needs for people working in their organisations at the moment. It is worth reflecting on the precise nature of this question in order to place the results that follow in context. First, it makes clear that this is a snap shot at a point in time. Given the preponderance of micro businesses (which is typical of the UK economy as a whole) it is important to recognise that learning and development needs typically arise in relation to business challenges, whether they be opportunities or threats, and the small business environment can be volatile. Time horizons in the smallest businesses are likely to be a matter of months. The responses we have today from such an employer may be very different to those we would have had or could have six months earlier or later. There has also long been recognition of the potential for a low skills equilibrium and latent skill gaps in the UK. That is, some sectors may be locked into low quality products and services which minimise skill demands and any shift in business strategy to higher quality offers would create greater skills demands. Second, we are relying on the interviewees' perceptions. If owner, managerial or human resource capacities are weak we could be reporting a failure to recognise a development need rather than its actual absence.
- 2.3.2 Less than a quarter of employers (22%) reported having any higher level learning and development needs. The proportion was lower amongst micro businesses (19%) compared to non-micro businesses (34%). Such needs were also more commonly reported amongst the 'all other industries' sector (37%). More detailed analysis by industry indicated higher learning needs were most commonly reported in education, business & financial services, health & social welfare and ICT. However care should be taken with these results as the base number of interviews in each individual industry was very low.
- 2.3.3 The areas identified as requiring higher level learning and development are set out in table 3. What has been labelled here as management and leadership is clearly the major area for development.

Table 4 Areas of higher level learning and development need

<i>area</i>	<i>%</i>
management and leadership	13
Professional/technical generally	6
ICT	3
Administration	2
Finance	2
Other	4

management and leadership

2.3.4 In line with earlier results, the proportion of employers reporting development needs in relation to management and leadership was substantially higher amongst non-micro businesses (22%) than amongst micro businesses (10%).

2.3.5 To seek to minimise the potential for under-reporting of development needs, those employers reporting no higher level needs were asked if they thought there were areas in which the business owners or senior managers could develop their abilities. Only 4% said there were; and this proportion halved amongst the non-micro businesses.

2.3.6 Great care needs to be taken with the interpretation of these results. There is a very well established literature that what micro business owners and the self-employed understand by this, and want in terms of learning and development, is qualitatively different from what would be appropriate in larger, and particularly corporate, businesses. This was reflected in our in-depth interviews. Owners of smaller businesses referred to a range of enterprise abilities. These most commonly related to aspects of winning and keeping customers, such as how to tap in to new markets, marketing skills and how to sell yourself and the business. Other areas included managing finance, business strategy and planning.

2.3.7 In a couple of the larger businesses employees were considering starting management degrees. A further area for development is people management. This may be a particular challenge for people who have risen through the ranks within an organisation and are promoted to positions where they have to manage people without any prior training or

experience. The skills required may include those related to team working and training or mentoring others.

professional and technical skills

- 2.3.8 In two of the medium sized organisations interviewed employees were studying for professional qualifications in marketing and accounting with the appropriate professional bodies.
- 2.3.9 Others expressed a need for more limited but still advanced forms of development. This was described as “top up training” for experienced staff and included advanced customer service skills, presentation skills and search engine optimisation techniques. In other areas the development may not need to be advanced but simply complementary to the main skill sets. An example was photography for estate agents.
- 2.3.10 The examples cited thus far from the in-depth interviews are of quite generic provision. There were also examples of very sector-specific needs. These included Foundation Degrees associated with Early Years Professional Status for child carers, professional qualifications for financial advisers and those required for accreditation as an energy assessor.

quantifying higher level needs

- 2.3.11 In table 4 we report the distribution of the number of people thought to have higher level needs. More than half of businesses thought they had only one or two such learners. This identifies an important challenge for learning providers: many of their potential learners will be spread thinly amongst a relatively large number of businesses. Again this will reflect the influence of micro businesses.

Table 5 Distribution of numbers needing higher level learning

<i>number band</i>	<i>%</i>
1 – 2	53.2
3 – 5	11.7
6 – 10	4.3
11+	5.3
don't know	25.6

2.3.12 Overall we estimate that this equates to approximately 14,800 people whom employers believe would benefit from higher level learning and development. Detailed analysis by industry suggests these are most commonly found in health & social welfare, retail & wholesale, other non-specified industries, construction and business & financial services. Again this information should be treated with caution due to the low base number of interviews in each individual industry.

spending

2.3.13 Table 5 presents figures for the level of spending on education, training and other learning and development support in the last year. Just over half of all employers (52%) reported no such spending. This figure was higher for micro businesses (60%) and substantially lower for non-micro businesses (24%). This indicates that in the overwhelming majority of employers the level of spending on learning and development support is very modest.

Table 6 Spending on learning and development support

<i>spending band</i>	<i>%</i>
Zero	52
Less than £500	11
£500 - £999	6
£1,000 - £1,999	9
£2,000 - £4,999	5
£5,000 - £9,999	4
More than £10,000	2
Don't know	11

2.4 Nature of provision

2.4.1 Participants in the survey were then asked about the forms of delivery that would be appropriate for such higher level learning. The question allowed for multiple options to be indicated so the percentage figures do not sum to one hundred. The results suggest a diversity of preferred forms of delivery. It should be noted that “on the job” was not one of the pre-coded options that were available to the interviewers and against which they recorded responses. These all originally fell in to the “other”

category but when asked to describe what was meant by this the most common response was “on the job” provision so this has been added as a distinct category. This response was more common amongst micro (12%) rather than larger (5%) employers. Conversely the latter group were more likely to opt for group training (55% compared to 34% for micros). The table also indicates where there appears to be substantial difference by industry by reporting those forms of delivery where one of the industry groups has a percentage seeking this form of support that is ten percentage points above or below the average.

Table 7 Appropriate forms of delivery

<i>form of delivery</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>industry most popular</i>	<i>%</i>
teaching	37		
group training	39	other	55
individual coaching	30	retail & leisure	14
mentoring	17		
on-line learning	15		
other distance learning	4		
on the job	10	retail & leisure	20
other methods	8		
don't know	5		

2.4.2 Similarly there was also an indication of:

- where support should be provided

Table 8 Where support should be provided

<i>location of delivery</i>	<i>%</i>
in the work place	64
at a college or similar centre	50
via a computer	9
elsewhere	4
don't know	4

This was originally a multi-coded question; that is, responses were not mutually exclusive, participants in the survey could responded positively to each option. Further analysis was therefore undertaken on the first two responses to identify

employers who only wanted support in the workplace, those who looked for support solely in a college or similar environment and those that specified both the work place and a college. The results are shown in Table 8.

Table 9 Where support should be provided

<i>location of delivery</i>	%
only in the work place	42
only at a college or similar centre	24
in the workplace and a college	27
other responses	9

- when it should be provided

Table 10 When support should be provided

<i>timing of delivery</i>	%
during normal working hours	76
outside of normal working hours during the week	30
at weekends	15
at other times	5
don't know	5

- and the extent of this provision

Table 11 Extent of support

<i>timing of delivery</i>	%
half day or less	22
full day	32
a day a week over several months	46
a day a week over several years	17
other	20
don't know	6

2.4.3 Once again there is clearly no simple way of classifying the provision that is required. Whilst there is a substantial proportion of survey participants who want to see the provision delivered during the working day, the form, location and extent of this support can vary.

- 2.4.4 In the first set of in-depth interviews nearly all the businesses expressed a strong satisfaction with the NVQ system and way that has been delivered for them, i.e. on-site with learning and assessment taking place mostly on-site. However they also sought or knew there was a need for some kind of off-site accredited short training although the specific requirements varied. Those that had employees taking engineering/electrical NVQs also sent them on off-site specific engineering/electrical one/two day training courses to supplement the NVQ training. Other businesses had arranged product knowledge training that was delivered on three consecutive Friday afternoons in a College or for IT trainers to deliver on-site to employees. They felt that worked well for them as long as the trainers could provide all the necessary equipment.
- 2.4.5 Fitting provision to working and business patterns was important but not necessarily easy. Where this was for NVQs or similar qualifications requiring observation of the learner in practice then this would need to occur at times appropriate to the relevant activity: this could be in evenings or weekends for some occupations, during the day for others. Where provision was college based it may need to be exactly the opposite; timed to occur outside key working hours. The difficulties were exemplified by a childcare provider had a parent who wanted to change careers and come in to the sector but training was currently only available in the day time when they were at work.
- 2.4.6 Flexibility was therefore important. One respondent commended provision from two professional bodies in this regard. A couple of others reiterated the need to fit in with working times and thought on-line learning may be preferable for this reason. Similarly a third thought distance learning could be appropriate.
- 2.4.7 Another form of flexibility was in terms of tailoring provision to meet particular needs. One of businesses said their ideal learning and development package would be more tailored towards their needs. As they are not a large business they need to send employees on public courses but these courses are not specifically tailored for their employees' needs. This was recognised to be a further challenge for providers. For example, there were references to people and customer

service skills but aspects of them were context specific. In one setting the focus was on building relationships and responding to objections to secure sales. In another it was dealing with customers who were drunk or aggressive.

- 2.4.8 In a similar vein other employers emphasised the need for training to be practical. This was most obviously the case with on-the-job training and assessment. *“They will come on site with you and there will be someone there with a clipboard looking over your shoulder to observe your site inspection, see how you deal with the customer and so forth. It is stringent but I think it is a good thing.”*
- 2.4.9 However it also extends beyond this context. For example one person *“would like to see an opportunity to meet other learners working in a similar situation. You could share ideas, experiences and questions”*. Another thought off the job training at the college would be helpful if it included simulations so responses to potentially real situations could be practiced in a controlled environment.
- 2.4.10 Allied to this was the need for providers to have personnel with the relevant experience. References were made to delivery by *“someone who understood .. the nature of the business and qualification”*, with expertise *“higher than us ... ideal if they are already in the industry”*. Similarly for enterprise skills *“it would be nice if the person delivering this had run their own business, been there and done it”*. There is extensive research evidence to reinforce this point.

accreditation

- 2.4.11 A majority of employers preferred the learning to be accredited, as shown in table 11. Whilst accreditation was sought by a majority of micro businesses (55%) it was substantially more popular amongst the larger businesses (82%).

Table 12 Learning and development should be accredited

	%
yes	61
possibly / in some cases	19
no	15
don't know	6

2.4.12 A majority (56%) of those seeking support only in the workplace were looking for accreditation but proportions were even higher amongst employers seeking college-based and mixed support.

Table 13 Learning should be accredited by where support should be provided

<i>location of delivery</i>	%	<i>base</i>
only in the work place	56	83
only at a college or similar centre	61	47
in the workplace and a college	72	53

(Note: particular care should be taken in interpreting these results as the base number of responses on which they are based is low.)

2.4.13 Those who wanted to see learning accredited were then asked whether the following awards would be appropriate for recognising work-based learning. The proportions of micro businesses seeking these forms of accreditation were consistently lower than for larger businesses but only marginally so. Similarly the proportions seeking these forms of accreditation are highest amongst the 'other' industries and lowest in manufacturing & construction but the differences are relatively modest.

Table 14 Accreditation for work-based learning

	%
Foundation degree	45
Honours degree	35
Master degree	29

2.4.14 Analysing these results by location of support provided the following results. It appears that those seeking work based support may be more likely to be looking for lower level accreditation.

Table 15 Accreditation type by where support should be provided

<i>location of delivery</i>	<i>Degree type, %</i>			<i>base</i>
	<i>Foundation</i>	<i>Honours</i>	<i>Masters</i>	
only in the work place	41	33	27	83
only at a college or similar centre	37	33	32	47
in the workplace and a college	57	40	21	53

(Note: particular care should be taken in interpreting these results as the base number of responses on which they are based is low.)

2.5 Providers and work experience

2.5.1 Employers were then asked who they would look to as providers for their higher learning needs. Many of the people offering other providers who were not included on the interviewers list of pre-coded options explained this further as my or ourselves. This has therefore been included as a code in its own right. Local colleges were most commonly cited as providers. It is also interesting to note that very few employers are looking to universities or colleges outside the area to meet their needs.

Table 16 Providers

	%
Local university	27
Local college	59
University or college outside the locality	6
Industry or professional body	26
Private training provider	25
On-line learning provider	4
Other distance learning provider	1
Myself / ourself	6
Other	13
Don't know	7

2.5.2 Those employers seeking combined support, in the workplace and in a college setting, appear most likely to utilise support from a local institution.

Table 17 Main providers by where support should be provided

<i>location of delivery</i>	<i>provider, %</i>		<i>base</i>
	<i>local university</i>	<i>local college</i>	
only in the work place	24	48	83
only at a college or similar centre	31	68	47
in the workplace and a college	36	74	53

(Note: particular care should be taken in interpreting these results as the base number of responses on which they are based is low.)

2.5.3 Only 8% of employers thought there were any important gaps in the higher level learning and development support that was needed and available to their organisation. However more than double this proportion (17%) said they did not know. The larger, non-micro businesses were rather more likely to report gaps (15%), as were manufacturing & construction employers (13%).

2.5.4 The gaps identified by employers varied greatly. Some were generic, such as health and safety, management and sales. Others related to the specific nature of their work, for example courses for teachers, welding and energy. Other issues mentioned included money being an issue and only being able to start a degree course in September.

2.5.5 Substantial minorities of employers had provided work or trainee places. Not surprisingly the participation rates were consistently lower amongst micro businesses, especially for apprenticeships but rather less so for work placements. The relatively high proportions of micro businesses willing to engage with education by providing placements is obviously good news, although the earlier caveat about the impact of non-response rates should be borne in mind in this context; the true proportion may be lower.

Table 18 Work and trainee placements

<i>Organisation has provided ...</i>	% yes		
	<i>all</i>	<i>micros</i>	<i>non-micros</i>
Student work placements	40	37	52
apprenticeships	22	14	45
Graduate internships	8	5	19
Other formal programmes for trainees	4	4	7
None of the above	56	62	38

2.5.6 Employers were also asked whether their organisation would be willing to participate in certain forms of training and development in the future. Comparing the results in tables 17 and 18 suggests there is considerable scope for increasing the proportion of employers providing training opportunities. This is marked for apprenticeships amongst micro businesses and for graduate internships more generally. It is interesting to note that the Federation of Small Businesses is supporting a Government plan to encourage such businesses to offer internships. The scheme will be formally launched in January 2010 and these results indicate this could represent a significant opportunity for providers of higher education.

Table 19 Future participation

<i>Organisation is interested in providing ...</i>	% yes		
	<i>all</i>	<i>micros</i>	<i>non-micros</i>
Student work placements	55	53	64
apprenticeships	47	44	58
Graduate internships	35	30	51

2.5.7 Overall a total of fifty-three employers, over a quarter (27%) of those contacted in the survey, said they had not previously had apprenticeships but were interested in participating in this form of training and development in the future. This is clearly a substantial proportion, particularly when compared to the 22% of businesses who had previously had apprenticeships.

2.5.8 These employers were relatively evenly spread between the three towns, with fifteen in Kidderminster and nineteen in both Bromsgrove and Redditch. They were also distributed across almost all the industry sectors, with the exception of agriculture and local government. The highest number of interested employers, eleven, was in retail and wholesale.

2.5.9 Those employers who were not prepared to offer all these training opportunities in the future were asked to say what the barriers were. The main reasons were lack of business benefits or time for supervision and cost. There was little difference by size of organisation on these measures. Indeed rather more non-micro business reported cost as a barrier than did micro businesses.

Table 20 Barriers to participation

	%
No obvious business benefit	34
Lack of time for supervision or quality control	32
Cost	25
Resources for planning and setting up	9
Lack of space, work stations, etc.	6
Regulatory or legal restrictions	5
Lack of information about them	4
Other reasons	37

2.5.10 Similar results were obtained from the in-depth interviews, with several even very small employers expressing interest in offering apprenticeships. For others the barriers cited again included cost and simply *“increasing the payroll”*, time (such as for planning, quality control and supporting the student), supervision. Other concerns included apprehension around students in terms of: *“common sense”*, how useful they will be and *“how relevant the qualifications they possess are”*.

2.5.11 Specific contacts were also thought not to be conducive to this kind of training. In one sector there was a reliance upon one to one interaction with clients so it may be possible to provide work shadowing opportunities but difficult to go beyond this. Another felt apprenticeship

“doesn’t really work” in financial services and it would not be something the business could sustain.

2.6 Developing support

2.6.1 Employers were asked what other kind of higher level training or other learning and development support they would like to see local colleges and universities offer. There were no clear or consistent messages emerging from response to this question in the survey.

2.6.2 A further question then enquired whether there was interest in specific services and support. The proportions of positive responses were modest.

Table 21 Other services and support of interest

	%
Knowledge Transfer Partnerships	18
Academic consulting	12
Using university or college equipment or premises	8
Product testing	9
none	74

2.6.3 Employers also had difficulty identifying any other services or support they would like to see offered. The most common response, but only from 6% of businesses, related to specialist training. The in-depth interviews provided some further specific ideas, beyond those already mentioned, including:

- more health and safety training, especially in more specialist areas other than, for instance, general first aid
- local management training
- specific engineering training.

2.6.4 The business organisations consulted in the first set of in-depth interviews were able to suggest a far broader range of potential, additional services. One stakeholder mentioned the provision of incubator units. These are small business units from which individuals can run their business within a university. These were thought to be very useful for small businesses running from home (which account for about 40% of

members of the Federation of Small Businesses) and allowing them to grow and develop further.

2.6.5 Another organisation stated they get enquires from businesses every month for University services, these on average included:

- Knowledge transfer partnerships (4)
- graduate internships (50)
- academic consulting (6)
- accessing university equipment (3)
- University product testing (3).

2.6.6 Another organisation suggested that there were specialisations within educational establishments and there was an opportunity for institutions to engage with businesses and offer these services. These services include: research, investigative approaches, specific project approach. They suggested that Universities take a more active role. Where there is a particular skill set within an institution they should identify the businesses that are in those local areas that could benefit from that and go and talk to them and see how they could work and interact with them.

2.6.7 Almost half (45%) of all employers said they would be willing to help local colleges and universities develop their provision and services to better meet employer needs. There was little difference in this respect between micro and non-micro businesses.

2.7 Communicating

2.7.1 Employers were asked to say how colleges and universities should communicate what they had to offer to them. Responses were diverse with the most popular options including electronic and traditional print media and direct contact.

Table 22 Preferred methods of communication

	%
e-mail	48
Printed newsletters	33
Website	32
Contacting employers	32
Local media	17
Open days	16
Via business or professional bodies	9
Single enquiry point for employers	5
Other means	11

2.7.2 The in-depth interviews reinforced the message about the importance of communication and ensuring that the provision that was available was visible to businesses. The interviewees identified a wide range of educational contacts amongst this relatively small group of employers although two businesses had not had direct contact with any local educational institutions. Amongst the others their contacts extended beyond the county. Universities contacted included Birmingham, Aston and Central England; colleges included South Birmingham, Sutton Coldfield/Matthew Boulton and Solihull as well as NE Worcestershire (with references to both Bromsgrove and Redditch). In addition three of the businesses had used private training providers. It is therefore clear that local institutions face competition from other providers.

2.7.3 Experience with these providers varied. Private providers were complemented in one instance for the rigour of their workplace assessment but another NVQ provider was described as “*pretty rubbish*”. In contrast a local college was complemented for the quality of its workbook although the quality of its assessment, in terms of depth and probing review of practice, was not considered as strong as the first private provider mentioned by the first employer above. Another business person had paid £12,000 or more for their specialist training through a private provider and thought local colleges should be able to deliver this at much lower cost.

- 2.7.4 Experiences with colleges varied. One respondent described his wife's experience "*a nightmare*". She had signed up for an access course where the venue had been changed, the lecturers did not appear to know what they were expected to deliver and assess and a University had said the course was not of the quality required for an access course.
- 2.7.5 A common area of dissatisfaction was with responsiveness to enquiries. Failure to respond to e-mails, difficulties contacting the right person to speak to and failures to return calls were all mentioned. Employers may contact institutions for diverse reasons: seeking potential employees, looking for training, interest in becoming a vocational trainer. Several reported difficulties in communicating what they were looking for and being directed to the correct person.
- 2.7.6 In contrast another business said that they have a very good relationship with a local college. The college has a business development manager who actively seeks out opportunities to work with employers. They said he was very good at being a single point of contact, coordinating everything for them, and providing quotes and information for them.
- 2.7.7 Other suggestions for improving services included:
- more information about courses that are available. Examples included flyers "*like theatres do; they tell you what is coming in the next few months*" and use of local radio. However a local business organisation thought mail shots tend not to work because businesses treat them as junk mail
 - websites containing detailed course and pricing information
 - more information about funding that is available
 - contact more local businesses and involve them; if they grow and take people on then that is of mutual benefit
 - build relationships with businesses on a local basis and maintaining contact
 - going out and talking to employers
 - helping employers with who they need to contact and where to go, better customer service. "*You need to get your questions answered. Whether that happens depends on who you get and what sort of day they are having. It is not consistent.*"
 - open days and open presentations

- offering one-off evening classes
- using local businesses for the services they can provide, including helping them tender for work

3 Research activity

3.1 Initial interviews

- 3.1.1 The first set of interviews included five local employers and representatives of two key organisations: the Federation of Small Businesses and Business Link. The businesses ranged in size from 5 to 160 employees. The industries covered included engineering, motor service, warehousing and distribution, sale of mobility products and supported employment and training. The latter organisation was a charity. The contact details were provided by one of the research sponsors.
- 3.1.2 Topic guides were developed and agreed for the interviews. These are reproduced in Appendix 1. The interviews were conducted over the period 12 to 23 October 2009. Due to the difficulty in securing interviews, participant requests and the pressure to keep to the overall project timetable, the interviews were conducted by telephone.

3.2 Conduct of the survey

- 3.2.1 The telephone survey was conducted by Vector Research (<http://www.vector-research.net/>) between 20 October and 4 November 2009. Responses were recorded using a computer assisted telephone interview (CATI) system.
- 3.2.2 Two lists of employer contacts were purchased from the Prospect Locator database, a source based on Yellow Pages. All the entries were either single site organisations or the head quarters of multi-site businesses. This restriction has been imposed to avoid having multiple contacts for the same business. The first list was of all 1,006 businesses with ten or more employees for whom contact provider had usable telephone contact details in the area. The second database contained entries for a sample of 2,000 micro businesses.
- 3.2.3 The total number of micro businesses in the area was far larger, 3,339. However we restricted the number of interviews with these businesses to ensure they did not dominate the completed survey. This was particularly important as it is reasonable to assume that larger employers may be more likely to express an interest in higher educational needs. This

disproportionate sampling of businesses was compensated for in the final results by weighting the data.

- 3.2.4 The questionnaire for the survey is reproduced in Appendix 2. This worked very well and did not require refinement. The only change instituted when the survey started in earnest was to incorporate a definition for Knowledge Transfer Partnership into the guidance provided for interviewers.
- 3.2.5 The total number of interviews, 200, limits the extent to which results for sub-sets of those interviewed can be reliably reported. Most of the commentary is therefore limited to comparing what we have referred to as micro businesses (with no more than 10 employees) with all other, larger businesses. We have also created three very broad industrial categories:
Agriculture, engineering, other manufacturing and construction
Retail & wholesale, hospitality and leisure
All other industries
For brevity in the subsequent text we have referred to these industries as manufacturing & construction, retail & leisure and other. The latter category is particularly heterogeneous since it covers predominantly private sector services (e.g. business and financial services) and public sector services (e.g. education and health & social welfare).
- 3.2.6 In presenting these results we have tried to added value by including a commentary and interpretation. This is necessarily subjective and reflects the authors' particular areas of expertise.
- 3.2.7 The results also need to be interpreted in the context of a significant non-response rate, which is typical for telephone surveys of employers on topics of this kind. Motivation to participate in surveys can come from different sources, some positive and some negative. In this context it is plausible that those agreeing to contribute to the survey will be employers for whom higher education is more relevant. Overall this may have a positive effect on measures such as those on engagement with education.

3.3 Final interviews

3.3.1 A final set of eight in-depth interviews were conducted with employers operating in the areas of

- child care
- construction
- design
- hospitality (two contributors)
- commercial services (three contributors)

Six of the participants were small, local businesses; the other two were parts of a group with interests outside the county.

3.3.2 The interviewees had previously indicated their willingness to participate in such interviews as part of the telephone survey. However just as many businesses in this group had refused to take part when contacted after the survey. These respondents should therefore be regarded as particularly positively disposed to issues of training and development. They have participated in the survey, indicated their willingness to do more and delivered on that promise. They should not, therefore, be regarded as typical of local businesses but representative of the kind of businesses which local educational institutions should regard as their most likely customers.

3.3.3 The interviews lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes. Two were conducted face to face and the remainder by telephone. A copy of the topic guide used for the interviews is reproduced in Appendix 3.

Appendix 1 Initial interview topic guides

Draft topic guide for Employer Needs (Businesses)

Name:

Organisation:

Job Title:

1. Can you very briefly describe your organisation, including the industry you work in and the size of the organisation? (Probe on the occupational areas employees are working; and write in job titles and approximate numbers).

Categories	Job Titles	Numbers
Directors/Senior Managers		
Managers		
Professional occupations		
Associate professionals / technical occupations		
Personal Service occupations		
Sales and customer service occupations		
Process Plant and machine operatives		
Elementary occupations		
Administrative and secretarial occupations		

2. In the last 12 months has anyone in the organisation received any formal training or other learning and development support?
(If yes, probe on: what it was, who provided it, and how it was delivered. How many people participated in such activities and what is your best estimate of the total direct cost to you? Did others contribute to the total cost of the provision [e.g. the learner, public funding]?)
3. What would you say are the main learning and development needs for people working in the organisation at the moment?
(Probe to identify the nature [e.g. skills] and level of this need, and also on the interviewees learning and development needs, and those of other owners/managers.)

4. In terms of the needs you just mentioned, what kind of learning or development support would best meet those needs? (Probe on level, delivery (time, place, mode), and whether accredited. If not clear, check whether this is higher education and particularly if the work-based learning offer of professional practice degrees is appropriate)
5. How many people in your organisation would [refer to each element of higher education referred to in Q4] be relevant to?
6. Who would you look to provide that support?
7. Are there any important gaps in learning and development support for local organisations? (If so, probe for details)
8. Has your organisation had or ever considered having: student work placements, apprenticeships, graduate internships? (If no, probe on why would you not be interested, or what obstacles would you face preventing you from doing so?)
9. If you could design your ideal training or learning & development package, what would it look like?
10. What other kind of training or learning & development support would you like to see local universities or colleges offering? (Probe on delivery, location, time and particularly whether the work-based learning offer of Foundation through to Masters degrees is appropriate)
11. Other than training or learning & development support, do you think there are any other services that Universities and colleges could provide? (Probe for details) * Prompts provided by LLN to be added
12. How could local universities and colleges most effectively work with you to respond to your needs and notify you about what they have to offer?
13. Are you a member of any business, trade or professional organisation or networks? (If yes, please give details.)
14. Is there anything else that you think is relevant that I haven't given you a chance to comment on?

Draft topic guide for Employer Needs (Organisations)

Name:

Organisation:

Job Title:

1. What would you say are the main learning and development needs in organisations in North Worcestershire at the moment? (Probe on type of needs and level; sector; including owners and managers.)
2. In terms of the needs you just mentioned, what type of training or development support would best meet those needs? (Probe on: level, delivery, and whether accredited. If not clear, check whether this is higher education and particularly if the work-based learning offer of professional practice degrees is appropriate)
3. Who do organisations look to provide that support? (Probe on the estimated total spend of training by organisations).
4. Are there any important gaps in learning and development support for local organisations? (If so, probe for details related to higher education)
5. What would you say are the main barriers to organisations accessing the support that is available? (Probe specifically on the work-based learning offer)
6. In terms of businesses hosting: student placements, apprenticeships or graduate internships; what do you think are the main obstacles facing them or reservations that they have?
7. In terms of learning & development support, what do you think colleges and universities could offer that would meet the needs of local businesses? (Probe on delivery, location, time and Work based learning provision).
8. Other than training or learning & development support services, do you think there are any other services that Universities or Colleges could provide?
9. Is there anything else that you think is relevant that I haven't given you a chance to comment on?

Appendix 2 Telephone survey questionnaire

Introduction

INTERVIEWER NOTE: ASK TO SPEAK TO THE HR MANAGER OR THE PERSON WHO RUNS THE BUSINESS I.E. OWNER/MANAGER
 Hello, my name is _____ and I am calling on behalf of North East Worcestershire and Kidderminster Colleges. The colleges are looking to improve their support for higher level learning and development and provide a better service to local organisations. To help achieve this we are conducting a short, confidential telephone survey of employers in the North Worcestershire area.

Everyone who takes part will have the opportunity to receive a summary of the results of the work. Would you be prepared to take part now, or can I call you back at a more convenient time? INTERVIEWER TO MAKE APPOINTMENT IF NECESSARY.

1. About your organisation

1.1. Is your organisation best described as being in the

private	
public	
third	

sector?

{If asked: by third sector I mean a voluntary, community or charitable organisation}

1.2. Which of the following categories best describes the industry in which your organisation works?

Agriculture	
Engineering	
Other manufacturing	
Construction	
Retail and Wholesale	
Hospitality	
Transport	
ICT	
Arts, design and media	
Business and financial services	
Education	
Health & Social Welfare	
Local government	
Other / none of the above	
(if 'other' please give details)	

1.3. How many employees does your organisation have? {code answer or read out options if unable to provide a specific number}

0-5	
5-10	
10-50	
50-250	
>250	

1.4. What proportion of the employees are based in Worcestershire?

All	
Most	
About half	
Less than half	

1.5. How many of the employees would be best described as ..?

directors or senior managers	
managers or team leaders	
professional staff	
technicians or associate professional staff	

{If asked:

professional staff would include: civil engineers, doctors, lawyers, accountants, teachers, social workers

technicians or associate professional staff would include: laboratory and IT technicians, nurses, designers, community workers, fire fighters, insurance brokers}

1.6. Are there any other occupational groups who you would expect to develop higher level abilities?

{If asked: by higher level abilities I mean advanced management, enterprise, professional or technical skills to increase innovation, creativity and efficiency. }

yes		
no		go to q.2
don't know		go to q.2

1.6.1. Which groups are these? {write in descriptions for this question and numbers from following question}

<i>group</i>	<i>number</i>
a)	
b)	
c)	

1.6.2. How many [list a) to c) in turn] are employed in your organisation?

2. Learning and development needs

2.1. What would you say are the main higher level learning and development needs for people working in the organisation at the moment? {Write in details or tick no higher level needs}

{ If asked: by higher level abilities I mean advanced management, enterprise, professional or technical skills to increase innovation, creativity and efficiency }

{write in detail}		go to Q2.2
we have no higher level learning and development needs		go to Q2.1.1

2.1.1. Are there any areas in which you think the business owners or senior managers could develop their abilities?

yes		write in details below
no		go to q.3
don't know		go to q.3

2.2. How many people in your organisation would benefit from higher level learning and development support?

{write in number& go to q.2.3}	
{if unable to give number, offer bands below; do not read out don't know option}	
1-2	
3-5	
6-10	
11-20	
21-50	
51-100	
more than 100	
<i>don't know</i>	

2.3. What is your best estimate of your spending on education, training and other learning and development support in the last year?

{write in number & go to q.2.4}	£
{if unable to give number, offer bands below; do not read out don't know option}	
zero	
less than £500	
£500 or more but less than £1,000	
£1,000 or more but less than £2,000	
£2,000 or more but less than £5,000	
£5,000 or more but less than £10,000	
more than £10,000	
<i>don't know</i>	

2.4. In terms of the higher level needs you have identified I would now like to ask you some questions about the kind of learning or development support that would best meet those needs.

2.4.1. Which of the following forms of delivery would be appropriate?
Please identify all that apply.

teaching	
group training	
individual coaching	
mentoring	
on-line learning	
other distance learning	
other methods	
{if 'other methods' please give details}	

2.4.2. Where should this support be provided? Please identify all that apply.

in the work place	
at a college or similar centre	
via a computer	
elsewhere	
{if 'elsewhere' please give details}	

2.4.3. When should this support be provided? Please identify all that apply.

during normal working hours	
outside of normal working hours during the week	
at weekends	
other times	
{if 'other times' please give details}	

2.4.4. What best describes how extensive this support would need to be?
Please identify all that apply to meet different needs.

half day or less	
full day	
a day a week over several months	
a day a week over several years	
other	
{if 'other' please give details}	

2.5. Do you think this learning and development should be accredited in some way?

{If asked: by accredited I mean certificated by a university or vocational qualification Awarding Body in a way that would be recognised by similar organisations. So not just a certificate of attendance or participation but a qualification or recognition that could count toward a qualification.}

yes		
-----	--	--

no		go to q.3
possibly / in some cases		
don't know		go to q.3

2.6. Would work-based learning leading to the following awards be appropriate?

{If asked: by work-based learning I mean studying at work for a qualification based on what you do in your own job, making use of work projects and independent study}

<i>award</i>	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>d/k</i>
Foundation degree			
Honours degree			
Masters degree			

3. Who can provide what you need

3.1. Who would you look too to provide the learning and development support required? Please identify all that apply.

local university	
local college	
university or college outside the locality	
industry or professional body	
private training provider	
on-line learning provider	
other distance learning provider	
other provider {please give details below}	
don't know {do not read out as an option}	

3.2. Would you say there are any important gaps in higher level learning and development support that is needed by and available to your organisation?

yes		go to q.3.2.1
no		go to q.3.3
don't know		go to q.3.3

3.2.1. Please give details

--

3.3. Has your organisation ever had...?

student work placements	
apprenticeships	

graduate internships	
other formal programmes for trainees	

{If asked:

by student work placements I mean any period of work experience, whether for school, college or university students

by graduate internship I mean fixed term trainee positions for graduates within organisations, possibly subsidised by the Government's graduate internship scheme}

3.4. Would your organisation be interested in participating in any of these forms of training and development in the future?

<i>scheme</i>	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>d/k</i>
student work placements			
apprenticeships			
graduate internships			

{If answering yes to all options at q. 3.4, go to q.4}

3.5. What are the barriers to participating in placement, apprenticeship or internship schemes? {Do not read out; code all responses}

lack of time for supervision/ quality control	
lack of space / work stations / etc	
resources for planning and setting up	
cost	
regulatory/legal restrictions	
no obvious business benefit	
lack of information about them	
other reasons {please give details below}	

4. Developing the support that is needed

4.1. What other kind of higher level training or other learning and development support would you like to see local colleges or universities offering?

--

4.2. Which of the following services and support provided by local colleges or universities would be of interest to you?

Knowledge Transfer Partnerships	
Academic Consulting	
Using University or College Equipment or Premises	
Product testing	

4.3. What other services and support would you like to see local colleges and universities providing?

--

4.4. Would you be willing to help local colleges and universities develop their provision and services to better meet the needs of local employers?

yes	
no	
possibly	
don't know	

4.5. How should local colleges and universities communicate what they have to offer to local employers?

e-mail	
website	
printed newsletters	
local media	
via business or professional bodies	
open days	
contacting employers	
single enquiry point for employers	
other means {please give details below}	

5. Contacts

5.1. Which of the following business/trade or professional organisations are you a member of? Please identify all that apply.

a. Chamber of Commerce	
b. Federation of Small Businesses	
c. Forum for Private Business	
d. Trade/industry body	
e. Professional body	
f. Other organisation	

If identifying any of d. to f. go to q.5.1.1, otherwise go to q.5.2.

5.1.1. Please give details

--

5.2. Would you..? Please tick all that apply

be willing to be interviewed in more detail as part of	
--	--

this research	
be willing to allow your contact details and interests to be passed to the local colleges and university	
like to receive a summary of the results of this survey	

{If none of options ticked, go to q.6.}

5.3. Can I please note you name, organisation and contact details, solely for the purposes you have specified?

name	
organisation	
e-mail	
telephone	

6. Thank you for your time

Appendix 3 Final interview topic guide

Name:

Organisation:

Job Title:

[All interviews to be preceded by a review of the survey responses to brief the interviewer and identify any particular issues to be addressed]

1. In the survey you indicated that there were higher level learning and development needs in the business. Can you describe these in detail for me?
[Interviewer to note each description in turn and check this covers items identified in the survey]
2. Thinking of the people in your organisation who have these higher level learning and development needs, what would be their typical levels of prior education and experience?
3. [If more than one occupational area, pursue each in turn] If a local college or university were able to provide an ideal programme of learning and development support to meet these needs, what would those programmes look like?
[Probe on: location, duration, mode of delivery, timing, cost, expertise of delivery staff]
4. Which local colleges or universities have you had contact with in the past?
5. What was the nature of that contact?
6. How satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the services they provided? [Probe on reasons if necessary]
7. Beyond these particular experiences, what would you say are the strengths and weaknesses of local colleges and universities in terms of helping to meet the needs of businesses such as yours?
8. What three things could these educational institutions do to improve their support for local employers?
9. Is there anything else that you think is relevant that I haven't given you a chance to comment on?