

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

managing change

By listening to its stakeholders and responding to their needs, an educational college in southern England has boosted student numbers and increased the range of services offered. This has helped it to manage the move from the public to the private sector

Six years ago, Guildford College of Further and Higher Education had 7000 students. Today it has a roll of 16,000 taking courses on everything from computing to law, hair and beauty and tourism.

Freed from local education authority control in 1993, Guildford became an independent company, taking over the running of its financial affairs from the county council. This required a rethink of how the college operated. Guildford chose a stakeholder approach and concentrated its efforts in two areas: staff development, which has enabled it to improve the quality of the teaching it offers, and working collaboratively with interested parties, including local businesses, other colleges and community groups, to increase the number of available courses.

MENTORS HIRED TO HELP THE TEACHING STAFF

‘It is all about being entrepreneurial while serving the community and showing we are here to meet their needs,’ says Lynne Sedgmore, the principal. An early step was to introduce professional and personal development plans for the 600 staff, with appraisals often leading to IT training and to guidance on leadership from mentors drawn from outside consultancies. The college now plans to appoint ten internal mentors. Sedgmore says it has been vital to consult staff throughout.

This staff development work helped the college to meet a social responsibility standard developed by the GoodCorporation, a network promoting good business practice – the first academic institution to achieve this. Its approach to attracting students also

played a part. By setting up learning centres in nearby villages, the college – which is a member of the Institute of Business Ethics – identified new markets for its services, including small and medium-sized firms needing business courses and the local Muslim community, which lacked courses in Islamic studies. It has added 40 courses to meet demand from these two groups and places applicants with other colleges if it cannot help.

Sedgmore’s eye is on the bottom line – more students mean more course fees and hence more

government funding – but the college also plans to widen its focus to include other stakeholders. Although it met GoodCorporation standards on policies towards suppliers and on environmental standards, Sedgmore thinks there is room for further improvement – and cost savings – in these areas.

Michael Littlechild, GoodCorporation’s chief executive, says: ‘It’s good to see an organization that has come out of the public sector showing the private sector how to put best practice into action.’

■ Further information: Guildford College on + 44 (0) 1483 448500 and GoodCorporation on + 44 (0) 20 7924 3994 or at www.goodcorporation.com

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■ Guildford College of Further and Higher Education has increased the number of courses it offers to students by identifying the needs of its stakeholders

comment
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Guildford College’s growth as a private college is in part the result of its innovative approach of reaching out to stakeholders, particularly staff and students. It demonstrates such an approach can bring financial and reputational benefits.

Features that impress are:

- The inclusive approach to staff demonstrates the value with which they are regarded and makes for a happier, more committed workforce
- The recognition that students are stakeholders
- The collaborative effort with other groups to enhance student opportunities while also meeting local business needs.

PHILIPPA FOSTER BACK, INSTITUTE OF BUSINESS ETHICS



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