

CASE STUDY

Setting up the world's first online customs academy for HMRC

PRODUCT: The UK Customs Academy



SUMMARY

HM Revenue & Customs requested the development of a world class customs academy as part of the third phase of measures to increase customs capacity in the UK marketplace ahead of a possible 'No Deal Brexit'.

In just five months after winning the contract, the IOE&IT and consortium partners had fully set up the academy, developing a comprehensive pathway of online qualifications for customs professionals.

In its first operational year, the UK Customs Academy has already become an industry-recognised training provider and online hub, exceeding the targets for members and new learners set by HMRC.

The project

HMRC wanted to bolster the customs intermediaries sector as a solution to preparing for the increased customs requirements that UK businesses would face if no deal was struck between the UK and the EU.

It planned to do this by improving the quality of online learning opportunities for those working in customs and by providing a clearer career trajectory.

The government realised that an online academy – a global first – could bridge the gap between the one-day training courses and higher education qualifications that the market already provided. It wanted the creation of a comprehensive customs pathway through Level 2 to 5 (GCSE to Degree Level) through which learners could progress at their own pace.

HMRC's aim for the new academy was for it to become a go-to hub for customs professionals.

How it was implemented

The IOE&IT, as part of a consortium with KGH Customs Services and the Centre for Excise Studies (CCES) at Charles Sturt University in Australia, won the contract to develop and implement the UK Customs Academy in June 2019.

Quick turnaround

- **June:** Contract signed to develop the UKCA
- **August:** UKCA website and the starter Level 2 course go live
- **September:** Level 3 and UKCA formally launched at House of Commons event
- **October:** Level 4 launched
- **November:** Level 5 launched

By drawing on the already established graduate diplomas and master's degree provided by CCES, the pathway was even extended up to Level 7 (Masters Level). CCES provide degree and post-graduate courses specialising in customs, excise and border management.

The UKCA's courses are fully online and supported by tutors, giving learners flexibility to study alongside their day jobs.

The quick turnaround of the project showed the IOE&IT's ability to work with agility, understanding the political imperatives and sensitivities, redeploying existing materials and adapting them with expert knowledge to comply with HMRC reporting and management processes.

Portal for customs professionals

The UKCA has also become a hub for customs professionals, with membership benefits including useful resources, regular news updates, webinars and practical tools.

In its first year since going live in August 2019, the website attracted 35,000 unique users, 52,000 sessions and 135,000 page views.

Promoting the UKCA

The IOE&IT pushed for broadening the scope of the target audience from intermediaries to include trading firms as well, increasing the potential reach of the project.

Traders are ultimately liable for ensuring customs declarations are completed correctly, even if using an intermediary. It was therefore essential that an online learning pathway was also provided to customs professionals working in firms.

The IOE&IT has proactively encouraged hundreds of thousands of people to look at the UKCA through a wide range of outreach:

- Promotion to IOE&IT trader database (320,000)
- Email to 250,000 readers of Forwarder Magazine
- Email to jobs databases including Reed Training (55,000)
- Digital ads on Google (241,000 reach) and LinkedIn (46,000)

Target audience

As well as customs intermediaries, the IOE&IT targeted the following:

- HR and finance directors at large firms
- Customs, logistics, supply chain roles at smaller firms
- Businesses across different sectors by using trade associations as outreach channels

HMRC grant funding

The IOE&IT also promoted government grants which funded the costs of customs-related courses for both traders and intermediaries.

The grants were initially launched in September 2019 to cover the cost of up to £2,250 of any course teaching firms how to complete customs declarations. The funding was revamped in July 2020 with an additional £50m, this time covering up to £1,500 per relevant course.

Through the grants the IOE&IT could promote Levels 2 to 4 – which were fully fundable – as effectively free of charge to complete.

Project costs

The contract for the development of the UKCA was valued at £1m. This went towards the creation of the website and online learning portal, the drawing together of course materials, marketing to recruit new learners and tutor teaching time.

Ongoing costs are covered by course sales.

Challenges

Bringing the content together

The main challenge developing the UKCA was bringing together the significant amount of training content from the consortia members to develop a coherent programme and pathway in a short space of time.

First of its kind

This is also the first academy of its kind to be developed anywhere in the world, with no pre-existing format for developing a digital customs pathway to follow.

Results

Compared to the targets set by HMRC, the UKCA has already or is on course to exceed targets for its first operational year:

	HMRC target	UKCA result as of August 2020
Total accredited qualifications	250	317
Learners to have completed one module	1,000	930*
Signed-up members	1,000	1,068

* The UKCA exceeded its target of 750 at the nine-month milestone

As of 12 August, the UKCA has sold 1,479 courses, with a 50-50 split between intermediaries and traders.

Firms to have used the UKCA include the Co-op, Motorola, Halfords, Aldi, Morrisons, Volvo, Mitsubishi, Ikea and Budweiser.

Complexity

The milestones given by HMRC were realistic due to the complexity of the subject matter and the length of time it takes to complete comprehensive and accredited qualifications.

High satisfaction ratings

Student feedback on UKCA courses	Agree or strongly agree
The course objectives were met	93%
The course materials were relevant	91%
The content was well structured and easy to follow	92%
I found the training site easy to navigate	93%
The questions were helpful and relevant	86%
I found the course to be a convenient way to study the topics	89%
Following the training, I have a much better knowledge of the topics	91%

Source: UKCA learner feedback forms

Broader than expected audience

Through webinars informing the broader business community about customs issues, the UKCA is widening its audience.

Six free-to-attend UKCA webinars have attracted over 7,000 registrations and 4,000 attendees since April 2020 with satisfaction levels averaging well over 90%.

The UKCA has been approached by several trade associations to produce tailored webinars for their sectors, including healthcare, automotive, cosmetics & toiletries, ports, aerospace and defence.

World class reputation

The UKCA has been written about in the FT, the BBC, Bloomberg and across the trade press. It has also attracted international students from Singapore, Australia, Germany, Italy, USA and Ghana.

Testimonials

"It's good that the UKCA is delivered in bitesize chunks. You can explore specific topics and come back later to review what you learnt. You take tests as you go ensuring the knowledge properly sinks in."

Lucy Masters, Imports & Exports Compliance, Co-op

"I enjoyed studying with the UKCA – I found the website easy to work with and the coursework easy to follow"

Lisa Meikle, Customs & Logistics, W Knight Watson & Co Ltd

