

Workforce Development

What works and why

Helen Connor



The Council for Industry and Higher Education

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Workforce Development

What works and why

Introduction

Investment in workforce development and adult skills of adults is increasingly seen as vital to the future economy of the UK. If Leitch's workforce targets, including at least 40% at Level 4 and above by 2020, are to be met, then more mutually responsive and engaged business and higher education relations have to develop. Higher education institutions (HEIs) have the potential to play a greater role in workforce development than they do at present. This has been acknowledged in several recent reports, including CIHE work¹, which have shown where HEIs are providing work-based learning solutions to businesses but also where key barriers lie in developing this further. A number of changes need to happen, including:

- Businesses better appreciating and articulating their needs whether directly or through intermediaries
- Higher education and employers having a better understanding of each others' cultures and what each could contribute to a learning partnership
- A better sharing of costs between state, employer and individual learner
- Provision by higher education of more relevant learning to employers, in appropriate ways and timescales
- Developing better processes for assessing work-based learning and accrediting in-company or other prior learning of employees

New development projects, supported by HEFCE's employer engagement strategy², are starting to address these issues and will provide a basis for developing higher education's future role in work-based learning. But experience has already been gained from other pilot projects and initiatives which can demonstrate ways in which employer and HEIs have worked together effectively on meeting higher level skill needs. This is the focus of this paper. The main aim has been to draw together lessons learned from successful practice in providing work-based learning solutions and offer some useful pointers on what works and why and disseminate key messages as widely as possible.

Background and context

Recent research has shown that the workforce development market for higher education is much more complex and also more diverse than HEIs' traditional student market³ i.e. typically young school leavers taking full-time study on campus for long periods at a time. Key differences are that the 'client' in the workforce development

¹ See CIHE, 2005

² HEFCE website

³ See various reports, including the Higher Education Academy's report on Work-based learning: illuminating the landscape, by Nixon et al (2006) and Marilyn Wedgwood's paper for the DfES *Employer engagement: barriers and facilitators (Interim Report)*, Jan 2007

market can be employers or adult employees (maybe both at once), with varying needs and aspirations; the learners have a range of prior learning experiences and qualifications, often not articulated well; the costs of studying are usually met wholly by the employer or employees, or shared, rather than by the state; the learners (and their employers) usually want to study at times which fit with their work (on-line, at home, in the workplace) and in short bursts, rather than going for long periods of time to study on-campus; and assessment needs to be done in relevant ways (not usually by traditional written exams) which relate to their work situation. Learners may be looking to extend their capabilities at level 4 or above or wanting to gain recognition for them; their employers are interested in outcomes which relate closely to their business needs, often on a relatively short term time horizon. For HEIs to have more success in this market (and the desire to do so will vary between HEIs) considerable internal changes are seen to be required by many, for example in their speed of responsiveness, delivery mechanisms, relevance of programmes to what is wanted by employer, and staff resources. Higher education sector-wide systems (eg funding, quality assurance, accreditation) have been set up for the traditional student market, and will need to adjust to work well in this new market.

Employers too will need to make changes. They need to be more willing to invest in staff development and understand the value in this, in making more use of external provision and in relating learning to a nationally recognised framework of qualifications. Traditional methods still tend to dominate most company learning and development with on-the-job training and in-house development programmes the most frequently used activities. Line managers may have taken on greater responsibility for learning and development activities in the last two years from the HR function, but they are viewed as not taking it seriously enough or not very effective in supporting it, mainly because of competing business pressures.⁴ Many employers, especially small and medium sized ones (SMEs) with little experience of graduates or higher education sector contacts, are unaware of what some HEIs can offer them and the development staking place within the higher education sector. As a consequence, many still hold the view that universities are only able to provide formal courses or qualifications, and not sufficiently relevant learning for their employees. Additionally, even if there was something offered of relevance, many employers do not expect it to be delivered flexibly enough by higher education to meet their business needs, nor assessed well enough for them in a business performance context. They often do not have the opportunity to find out what higher education has to offer them and do not receive much marketing materials from higher education compared to the private provider sector. Furthermore, many are unable to assess well what they might need for their employees and articulate that in terms that higher education is familiar with.

This report

The report is divided into two main sections. In the first, some conclusions are drawn about the ways in which the higher education sector can provide workforce development solutions which meet business needs, and the factors which have contributed to success in a number of areas. It also discusses where key lessons have been learned and where difficulties still lie. Recommendations are made about how more effective partnership working can develop. This draws off the examples in the second part, which provides more detail on current issues and trends and lessons learned from examples of pilot programmes and initiatives.

We are grateful for the support from HEFCE in helping to undertake this project and to the people who have given up their time to talk about their initiatives and experiences.

⁴ According to most recent *CIPD learning and development survey*, which also reports little change in employers practices

Overview

The project has shown that there are many and varied ways in which the higher education sector currently provides workforce development to meet business and employee needs and where it can potentially do more in the future. These offer new opportunities for people in work to experience higher education for the first time or to enhance their existing higher level achievements. But our research leads to a conclusion that it is still relatively small scale, more like a 'cottage industry' in higher education: it is not mass-market, and while it offers a distinctive type of learning provision, often unique, it faces numerous disadvantages when competing with larger, more traditional higher education provision as well as externally from the private training sector. It is characterised in the main it seems by individual staff who are committed and enthusiastic about delivering this kind of learning and making it a success, often against the odds. It is also a cottage industry in the sense that delivery is often bespoke to the learners' workplaces and their jobs, via their computer links to the internet, their tutors, work mentors and other student-work colleagues, and in only some cases, face-face tuition on campuses.

The examples of successful practices by higher education in workforce development illustrate a range of initiatives and programmes taking place across the sector, mostly on a small scale, where lessons have been learned by those involved about doing things in particular ways and in particular circumstances. Some of these lessons can be generalised where there are common themes which apply to many of them; we have drawn these out below. The examples highlighted though are just a selection of many more programmes which are at early stages of development, and have not yet had students qualify from, so too soon to say much about their success⁵. We have not attempted to provide a full coverage of all of them. Much of the current experience of work-based learning in higher education still lies in health and social care work settings rather than with private industry and business services, but we have aimed to focus on examples in the latter. Nor have we covered employer engagement in full-time undergraduate programmes, including full-time Foundation Degrees where work-related learning forms a core component, as these are covered well by other documents⁶.

Disappointingly, there is a real dearth of evaluative work in this area to draw from, presumably because of its relative infancy though as we show in the next section some universities have been active in providing learning directly to help improve business performance for many years. We have therefore had to rely on reflections of experience of individual staff involved and their views on what has contributed to success and continuing challenges and also their examples of individual student successes. However, we are aware of new research now underway on the impact of Foundation Degrees (by Foundation Degree Forward) and of work-based learning (by the Higher Education Academy) and look forward to them producing a more robust evaluative basis for the future.

Key Messages

1. There is **not one solution** that HEIs can offer employers but there needs to be many different ones to meet different circumstances and needs of businesses and employees. Some may involve the accreditation of in-house programmes or of prior learning, others provide learning and assessment focused on a specific occupation, employer and/or individual personal need, often having to be tailor-made (some comprise both). The provision may be linked to a specific technical development or practices (like compliance requirements) of a specific business sector or profession. Not all is work-based learning provision or learning taken at work (though this has an important role), it can be forgotten sometimes that there are ways in which some HEIs or their schools/departments have been successfully meeting skill needs of businesses for many years now, through specialised on-campus learning centres or distance learning.

2. The importance of being able to **offer flexible approaches** to meet employers' and employees' needs is highlighted in many of the examples given. For instance, this is seen as key in developing customised learning

⁵ especially in newly established Foundation Degrees and in the new HEFCE pathfinder projects which will be subject to separate evaluations on impact

⁶ See FDF, UUK

programmes to individuals and to businesses (as in the development of organisation-specific foundation degrees and in the way individuals can put together their own programmes and gain recognition towards university awards). The staff interviewed confirm just how key this is to engaging employers with higher education. Flexibility comes in different forms. It can work by giving good choice to individuals of modules/courses to take on their own or in building up to a qualification; by varying the size of units, including offering shorter, bite-sized units (which may be all that an employer wants at the time for their staff or all an individual can cope with while managing working and studying together), by offering different times/modes of delivery (combinations of: taking learning to the employer, evening and weekend study, use of internet to help support learning). A credit driven system rather than the current one based around the traditional student full-time model would help meet the flexibility needed.

3. Hand in hand with flexibility goes **relevance** of HEI provision to demand, and being **business-focused**. Staff in HEIs who work successfully with businesses recognise the importance of making the business case when promoting or 'selling' their workforce development offerings, that is identifying clear benefits of learning or assessment being offered in, for example, better retention, overcoming skill shortages, faster progression to management, meeting regulatory frameworks. This is very different from marketing to traditional students and requires staff to have insights and experience of the business world – 'talk the same talk'. If businesses are going to be encouraged to develop their staff more through externally provided learning, they need to understand its potential impact on their business and also the 'cost' of not investing in workforce development.

4. There are advantages in HEIs being able to provide learning which is **integrated** with a company's internal progression routes. This is evident from the efforts that have gone into developing new higher apprenticeship programmes by various sectors, and also identifying progression into and through new foundation degrees linked to businesses internal career development systems. It is also seen in the thinking going in to designing systems for accrediting existing training as an integrated package.

5. Learning leading to **qualifications** is attractive to individual employees in many instances, and also, though less so generally, to employers. But many industries require specific qualifications as licences to practise, not just in traditional professions but in new areas of financial and business services. They can also demonstrate specific competences and professionalism (it can be a first filter to accessing many jobs). This is where universities have traditional strengths, in helping individuals gain qualifications needed for furthering their careers and also meeting skills gaps in their business sector. Though many people associate universities with degrees, they can and do offer a range of other qualifications at level 4 and above. It is a potentially lucrative market for universities and colleges though also a very competitive one, and may be more so in the future as more private providers seek university status. But as others have pointed out (see Leitch), if universities ignore this market and do not market their added value, then they will find it difficult to break in and play a full role in the knowledge-intensive economy

6. Universities have a unique selling point in that they provide a consistent and high **standard of quality** and this should equally apply to their role in supplying work-based learning. In our examples, it clearly does, as in the use of the individualised learning frameworks which universities have developed. These are linked to formal academic accreditation standards and mainstream university processes (and the QAA framework). There has been a perception that achieving a degree from learning in the workplace rather than attending classes is of a lower standard or an easier option, while the reality for those involved has been the reverse: standards are as rigorous as on more traditional style degrees and balancing study with work creates its own intensity. This badge of quality may need to be promoted more if universities are to establish themselves better in the commercial market. Leading edge research can inform the learning that universities offer to business; this cannot be the case for the private sector.

7. But not all learning that higher education offers to businesses needs to be of a formal kind or linked to accreditation or qualifications. We show several examples of **informal learning** which is valued by employers, especially very small businesses, which have neither the funds nor the time to invest in formal management development programmes. These can include for example: mentoring and coaching in helping to develop a business plan, managing staff, marketing or other business skills. However, it can be difficult for HEIs to develop this part of the market within current mainstream systems of quality assurance and funding, and also with current staffing resources. Only a small proportion of the academic population are likely to have the right kind of

experience and skills to deliver it successfully. Small firms tend to be less interested in what universities have traditionally offered them, have less opportunity to get involved with universities (eg don't recruit graduates) or see them as relevant to their business, and they generally have tight margins and limited resources (time and the staff), which makes engagement harder to sustain. Informal flexible and modular learning can be particularly attractive to them.

8. We have been struck by the small scale of many of the initiatives and the lack of research undertaken on their impact or time being built in to pilot projects to evaluate them properly. There is little readily available material which is 'tried and tested'. Furthermore, there has been a **lack of sharing of practice** to date. Often we found small groups of very committed and enthusiastic staff working with employers and or employed students in relative isolation from other staff (within their own institution) also engaged with businesses. We welcome new initiatives taken to link the network of subject centres in higher education with Sector Skills Agencies in a number of disciplines, to encourage practitioners across the sector to share and learn more from each other. However, more 'joined up' working could be done by individual institutions as part of their own strategies.

9. A common theme running through many of the examples we looked at has been that the work-based learning is not just about developing skills and experiences useful in their work and/or needed by their business, but also about **personal development**. Indeed, several initiatives put emphasis on the development of individuals in their success criteria, and cited the personal changes which happen to learners taking such programmes, in developing confidence, communications skills, team working and so on. These are the kind of generic transferable skills which employers seek in graduates from traditional academic study, but which work-based learning may be more likely to provide. This is an aspect which often gets overlooked in discussions about the value of work-based learning where the emphasis can be too much on skills.

10. But probably the biggest issue identified in the study has been the **cultural differences** that exist still between the higher education sector and the business world, which act as a barrier to developing the necessary good working relationships for higher education-employer engagement. The important role that a **facilitator** can have in helping here has been demonstrated in several initiatives recently. He or she can help to establish close working between business and higher education staff at the design stage, and mutual 'buy-in' at an early stage. There are examples emerging also of them acting as 'a critical friend' to businesses through the HEI accreditation process of jointly designed programmes.

11. A learning lesson demonstrated by many of the initiatives is how much patience on both sides is needed to get partnerships developed and sustained. Collaboration and the development of new WBL programmes usually turns out to be **complex** experiences, and there is a tendency for employers to expect developments to progress more quickly than academic staff are used to. Experience has shown that much longer timescales are usually needed to develop new accredited programmes than businesses expect, and the internal processes of accreditation can seem laborious to them. The expectations of both partners on this need to be clear at the outset, and especially agreement on timescales. Ways need to be found to make the academic processes simpler but without jeopardising academic standards

12. As mentioned above, many of the initiatives to date have been successful pilot projects with small numbers of students involved, often run with very small resources. They have been small enough to work within existing institutional systems (eg funding, quality, reporting arrangements), but this would be near impossible if scaled up. If work-based learning is to grow significantly in HEIs then systems **need to be designed appropriate** to them. One issue is how to design an efficient and fair funding system which can accommodate small 'bites' of learning, say of 10 or 15 credits, when large numbers are taking them, rather than having to try to fit them into the current system which is based around full academic years of 120 credits or more.

14. **Accreditation of prior learning (APL)** has a significant role in many WBL initiatives but can require a lot of time and resources to make it work well. There were varying practices between different institutions and schemes in the maximum amount of credit that a learner can get for prior learning and experience. It is a cheaper option for learners often, but is not clear sometimes what the true cost of it is and it may not be all passed on in fees. We found charges to learners for APL varied between institutions. This situation does not seem one that can be sustained if work-based learning is to grow significantly, and greater consistency across the sector and clarity for

the learners and employers is needed. Streamlining the process with perhaps greater automation would seem to have some benefits to individuals and employers as long as it did not stifle innovatory practices developing.

16. **Marketing** of new programmes or schemes to businesses was found in our examples to be harder to do than expected by the higher education staff involved and is a significant challenge. It took a lot more time and often needed more resources than anticipated. There was no consensus about a 'best' approach, often multiple messaging was needed, 'cold calling' to numerous employers and use of intermediary organisations. Marketing via individuals was often found to be more effective than directly to employers. Issues to be dealt with include raising awareness of, and overcoming prejudices against, higher education as a supplier of workforce development, and it is here where rather a lot seems to have been left to the individual staff or schools running the new programmes. There is a case for universities to promote work-based learning and workforce development more as a key area of their business (where it is or intends to be) and to not leave this to the individuals involved in specific pilot programme.

17. And finally, there are questions of **sustainability** of pilot programmes. We found in many of our examples that costs to employers/employees were being met by Government during the pilot years, so the learning was free or at very low cost to participants. When this funding came to an end, some of the pilots did not continue. Although we set out to try to find some successful practice in co-funding we found insufficient evidence to draw any conclusions about what might work best. This is an area which the new HEFCE pathfinder projects are addressing which we welcome, and we hope to see some important messages emerging from them soon.

In conclusion, we have shown that to increase the amount of income from work-based learning coming to higher education will require actions on many fronts but in particular:

- A deep understanding of business needs and their purchasing of staff development, and how these differ from sector to sector and business to business, so that higher education institutions can position themselves better in this market
- Staff who can bridge the divide between academia and work, and probably have a relevant sector background to underpin their credibility; facilitators acting as both consultants and interpreters between both sides may well also be needed
- A flexibility of approach that is very different from that taken with students in traditional undergraduate courses
- Sufficient critical mass of businesses to make the effort worthwhile; HEIs being part of the networks that SMEs use may help to achieve this
- A credit framework within which a range of options and pathways can be accommodated
- And accreditation processes that, while safeguarding the quality that is the trademark of the sector, are as responsive and 'fleet of foot' as anything that the private learning provider sector can offer.

Workforce development – what makes success?

In this second section, a number of examples of new approaches to workforce development are used to illustrate where the higher education sector has been successful in offering workforce development and where lessons can be learned. Not all demonstrate wholly successful outcomes, some show where challenges have been encountered and are still 'work in progress'.

The discussion is organised into five main areas where higher education is likely to be more successful in capturing a greater share of the workforce development market in the future. They include:

- Individualised or customised learning and development
- Part-time courses taken by employees
- The accreditation of in-house programmes towards higher education awards
- Integrated programmes of progression from apprenticeships to higher education, and
- Non-accredited, informal learning, mainly for the SME market.

Individualised or customised learning and development

Many universities and colleges (in particular business schools) have traditionally offered customised learning and development to businesses and individual employees through their CPD short course provision, and some also through programmes leading to masters, MBA or other qualifications. As we have reported elsewhere⁷, CPD income to the higher education sector is considerable (some £300m annually⁸); however, this represents only a very small share of the total learning and development 'spend' by private business (even if only that part which is spent on management and professional development is counted rather than the total) and so the business market share which HEIs currently have here is small. Furthermore, it is concentrated in a small number of universities with specific reputations with large corporate businesses; in most universities CPD represents a relatively small income stream. Most of the CPD provision currently provided is aimed at the further development of graduate, professional and management staff, rather than up-skilling of the workforce, and the extent of 'customisation' varies. Typically, they comprise classroom-led programmes, involving employees spending periods of time spent away from work, rather than much work-based learning.

How much employer demand there is for CPD, or for other forms of work-based learning, which HEIs could provide to businesses, is unquantifiable, as our previous report has demonstrated⁹. There are mixed views from employers on the advantages of going to a university or college rather than a private training provider, especially for lower level management development. A recent DfES report on employer engagement¹⁰ commented that universities possess an advantage over the private CPD market where their qualifications lead to the award of a high status qualification such as an MBA but also lower qualifications which nonetheless carry a university's trade mark. But they were less well regarded by employers for more targeted, lower level CPD because this was sometimes seen as being not sufficiently flexible or too focused on qualifications linked to CATS points. Recent research in the financial services sector shows a preference for in-company training for much of their staff development needs, partly on the grounds of cost but also on effectiveness and flexibility¹¹.

Nonetheless, certain universities and colleges have developed a good market position for customised MBAs, mainly with large employers who have valued this for their young managers as part of their high potential development programme. There is uncertainty, however, about how far this niche market can be sustained or even grow as we have seen a trend for large corporate businesses to replace their customised MBAs with shorter individualised programmes, taken in-house (with higher education staff as tutors) or by e-learning (eg Open University), focused more on a particular business issue or problem of the day. To be successful in meeting this

⁷ *Workforce development: how much engagement do employers have with higher education?* CIHE, March 2007

⁸ according to HEFCE's higher education Business and Community Interaction Survey

⁹ Op cit, CIHE, 2007

¹⁰ Hogarth et al (2007) *Employer and University Engagement in the development and utilisation of graduate level skills*, DFES Research Report 835a

¹¹ *The Skills Bill: assessment of education and training provision in UK financial services*, FSSC 2007

demand, requires HEIs to be more involved with their company clients. Staff need to have credibility in understanding business problems as they may be required to undertake 'needs analysis' work and advise on what kind of skills intervention or learning solution is required and how it can be delivered best - within an existing internal programmes, a new programme or taken as part of an existing programme already offered by the university or its business school? And which solution provides the best returns on investment for the firm? This kind of service is something which private training providers are used to offering to businesses as part of their package of bespoke learning solutions but is less familiar to most universities (and some Business Schools) who are more used to offering an existing package to businesses or adapt one to meet stated requirements. It is unlikely that many current academic staff have sufficient experience of the world of work, and it is more likely to be non-academic staff in associate (as in the Warwick Manufacturing Group example highlighted below) or business development roles who can take this on. Another trend, commented on also in our other recent report on workforce development (cited above), has been the internationalising of higher education partnerships by large companies, especially for developing their top tiers of management. While some UK University Business Schools have taken a share of this developing 'niche', many have been found to be poor in quality, marketing and relationship-building with business compared to overseas Schools

Offering more personalised learning approaches is a growing development within higher education. It has been used successfully to attract new work-based learners with diverse needs, as an alternative to traditional approaches from higher education. One example of this is in the use of individualised or negotiated learning frameworks to help individuals at work gain credit or qualifications. Since 2001, a number of HEIs have offered Learning through Work (LtW) in partnership with the University for Industry and Learndirect. The LtW scheme is a flexible approach to learning which offers work based learning opportunities to people who have gained the skills and experience, but may not have got the qualifications. It also offers people the prospect of updating their skills through a non traditional learning route in order to undertake CPD. To date, more than 2,500 people have registered and developed LtW contracts, the majority in employment-based cohorts; over 550 employers have been involved and the programme is now offered at nine universities (with 15 planned by Learndirect by the end of this year). The School of Flexible and Partnership Learning at the University of Derby has been one of the most successful at using this approach for developing work-based learning programmes. It recently received a national award, the 2006 Times Higher Award for 'Most Imaginative Use Of Distance Learning', in recognition of the flexibility of the programme and the fact that learning is tailored to meet the needs of the individual and the employers.

University of Derby's Learning through Work programme

Context, description and main purpose:

Derby's Learning through Work (LtW) programme is currently offered by the School of Flexible and Partnership Learning, a new School set up in 2005.

Learners undertake learning that can be in "bite sized chunks", usually 30 credits; and then they can continue with their learning in order to complete a degree or postgraduate qualification. They can create a unique learning programme that is customised to meet their individual needs. They are supported by a combination of a central delivery team and the appropriate academic schools and departments within the University, as often learners require support from several schools to complete their programme.

The learners are able to experience a range of different learning methods including face-to-face, e-learning and distance learning as well as negotiated work based modules. All the learning is supported by a team of tutors who support and guide the learner. As part of their learning contract, learners are also able to build a claim for prior experience and knowledge (APL). At present the University of Derby is working on a JISC funded E-APEL project that will support learners to identify the level of their prior experience and knowledge through an online support programme.

The University of Derby supported the first graduate through the LTW programme in 2003, and has more than 800 learners registered currently on the programme, with two thirds studying at undergraduate and one third at

(Continued...)

postgraduate level. Around two thirds of these participants are in employment-based cohorts, where an employer has been involved in the design of the programme for their staff; the other third have come on as individuals and may or may not have their employer support. Learners range from self employed individuals to employees of multi-national businesses. Examples of programmes developed at Derby for small employers include: website development for business; caring for older people (both leading to Certificates of Achievement, 30 credits) and design for print and digital presentation (leading to a University Certificate, 60 credits). They have also recently designed a bespoke Foundation Degree for employees in a national Construction firm to embed work place learning and projects, and support their move away from the HNDs. Another recent development for the University has been as part of a consortium with the RAF to provide learning and accreditation to aircrew personnel. Individual student's programmes vary, for example:

- A BA graduate in applied arts created her own, very successful company but needed further learning to help get her business off the ground. With help from the Derby team she designed modules around her own business, including business planning, web design, finance, marketing, and material development, which were externally examined and quality assured as in a 'traditional' university qualification. She has graduated with an MA in Sustainable Design and Business.
- A maths graduate wanted to get an MSc in combustion and performance modelling in order to meet the changing business environment he was in, help increase his company's technical capability and improve his chances of becoming a consultant engineer. His programme included a claim for prior learning as a design engineer, some standard university modules in computing, a design project at work and an independent study project with a dissertation.
- An outdoor activities instructor found that a lack of formal qualifications was holding back his career. Despite having specialised practical experience, he was told by employers that he needed a degree. His programme crossed traditional discipline areas by combining the learning of materials technology with philosophy of outdoor education, curriculum design pedagogy and teaching skills. His assessment was by written assignments, research projects and presentations. He gained a BA in Outdoor activities management.

There are a number of people within the school of Flexible and Partnership learning whose role is to engage with employers. It is through this personal contact that the LTW programme receives much of its business; it also comes through word of mouth via recommendation from previous learners who have identified that the programme has met their needs and passed this information on to other potential learners. Other sources of learners are through the Learndirect and the University's websites and the University's Business Development Unit. Links have also been made with the local Chamber of Commerce, Business Link, and East Midlands Quality Centre, where University staff have built a good relationship and a reputation for accrediting work-based learning.

Lessons learned

The University stresses the importance of the programmes being learner-centred. There have been occasions when programmes have initially been employer-led work based learning but have not given enough attention to the learners' needs. However, the central team has overcome this with the individual learning plan and the learner focused needs analysis. Each learner completes an individual learning contract describing their learning objectives and outcomes.

The time needed to complete the programmes can be very demanding on the individuals. Nevertheless, there are many examples where individuals have found it very rewarding and enjoyable, even though they may have previously failed in earlier attempts to work as well as study.

"..it can fit into anyone's lifestyle...I feel I have been on a personal and professional journey"

"I had always wanted to complete a degree and this was the only way I could achieve this aim – the luxury of three years' full time study was not something I could undertake!"

(Continued...)

“Gaining a degree is a lifetime ambition for me and the day will be a real milestone”

Feedback from employers is informally done but suggests that it is an approach which has many advantages, especially enabling staff to get relevant qualifications without taking time off, and at reasonable cost. Companies who are interested in staff development, and who are often working towards achieving the national standard of Investors in People, have seen the benefit of undertaking this type of learning

Branding is important – the University believes that a key selling point to employers is that their LtW programme is ‘university + degree’. They don’t use terms like ‘learning you can negotiate’ or ‘learning through work’. Individuals negotiate their own degree including its title, subject to approval by the University board.

The School of Flexible and Partnership Learning works hard to liaise with all the other schools, faculties and business units within the University. They see it as being essential that they are included within potential collaborative discussions and do not get sidelined into a specialist unit. The Derby LtW programmes are incorporated into the full range of University provision, and involve all Schools.

Marketing is resource-intensive. The personal approach can be said to work most effectively although a number of marketing strategies are employed (through websites, local events, intermediary organisations), because they are working in multiple and varied markets.

Many students’ programmes have to be trans-disciplinary, to meet their specific personal and work needs, in this way they can be of most value to the individuals or their employers. This can complicate matters in terms of working within university systems for funding, student records, linking students with personal tutors, and quality assurance processes; however the linking of student support is considered a strength within the central tutor team.

LtW staff have found that they need to monitor closely the progress of students so as to be able to prepare for and organise assessment boards in advance (including: who needs to be present, evidence to be presented). Individuals are notified well in advance of the assessment boards and although they are working at different pace towards the completion of their awards, they are given the opportunity to have their work presented. There can be delay problems if learners miss the timing of their Board and have to wait till next one, which may not be for several months (as they tend to meet three times a year as in rest of the University).

HEFCE systems of reporting are not helpful. The School works on a rolling programme, not Sep-July academic years. Students can start on a LtW programme at any time of year yet there are only two reporting dates for the University to get funding for them: for example a person might start but their funding from HEFCE not come through until later in the academic year. While numbers of learners stay relatively small, it is manageable to work within these constraints, but it will not be if they were to scale up significantly. They would like to see greater flexibility in HEFCE reporting and funding.

The School makes extensive use of APL using the LtW level descriptors (derived from QAA descriptors and in earlier work by regional credit consortia) and would like to encourage this more. They are looking at ways of developing the process online and enabling learners to become more aware of the level at which they are working and therefore better prepared for learning. The University is participating in JISC e-APL project.

(For more information of the Learning through Work programme and other examples, contact www.learn-direct-ltw.co.uk)

Other universities also use a negotiated learning framework approach to provide ways of helping employees build qualifications around their jobs, in a range of types of work and companies. For example, at Teesside University’s Centre for Lifelong Learning, individual learning programmes can be negotiated between individuals and the University. Here, a set of generic modules has been developed which give individuals the tools to audit themselves and their work experiences, and so produce portfolios of evidence to enable credit towards a university qualification to be given. These initial modules are taken in evenings at the University campus. Then, further credit can be gained for work-based projects or by taking standard modules, part-time, offered by other

Schools. Modules can be studies of 10, 20 or 40 credit value. Previous learning and experience can be given university credit which gives an individual 'advanced standing' and in these cases, only a smaller number of modules need to be taken to complete an award. Students are recruited twice a year to the programme. Numbers are fairly small (the last cohort was 19) but they are limited in having more learners by the resources of the School to deliver the programme and also to market it to employers. The potential demand is believed to exist, as it is attractive to students at work because they can have a wide choice of modules, can claim credit for major areas of experience and previous qualifications (if in same area) and can obtain a qualification in a shorter time than on traditional part-time study (though some do take longer, up to 8 years is permitted). Examples of learners achieving BA degrees by Negotiated Learning at Teesside in the last few years have included a process engineer, a language teacher, a police inspector and an IT trainer. The approach has also been used in accreditation of in-house training programmes of businesses (see example in section 3.3 below).

Another example is Middlesex University's National Centre for Work-based Learning Partnerships which has an established Work-based Learning Studies programme. This also provides a customised approach based on individuals' experiences and interests. Over 2,000 people have taken this route to help them gain academic credit towards university awards. Some of these have been for groups of employees (such as the food management programme at Marks and Spencer), and they are offered at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Students can pay for modules (10 credits), or for accreditation of prior learning and experience or for whole courses.

There are also a number of examples of where individualised frameworks have been used to develop new Foundation Degrees in partnership with employing organisations so as to give them a qualification which meets their needs. One of these is the University of Chester's Work-based and Integrative Studies (WBIS) degree framework which has been used to help develop a new foundation degree for the Civil Service, the F4Gov. This is one of the largest foundation degrees in the country, with over 350 students recruited since 2004. The F4Gov was designed as a new qualification to meet the specific needs of the Civil Service for a broadly-based intermediate qualification for large numbers of their staff. The demands of the employer were that it should be relevant to their work practices and can be achieved through not taking long time periods away from work, so it has a strong work-based learning focus and makes use of a dedicated virtual learning environment (VLE). It contains a mix of prescriptive elements, so that the employer can ensure that learning covers some core areas, optional negotiated modules which can be chosen by learners, and APL considerations. Among the lessons learned by staff at Chester from developing this customised new degree for an employer like the Civil Service, with a variety of different participating departments and work priorities and a workforce spread over many locations, were: that it is a more complex process to manage than most academic programmes as it is overseen by a joint academic-Civil Service management board as well as the normal university quality assurance processes; that flexibility is needed to work with different Civil Service departments where views of what is needed on the programme vary and also staff change jobs frequently; the need to align the new qualification's benchmarks of achievement with internal ones for senior civil servants (including anticipating some not yet finalised); and managing the tensions between an organisationally driven learning agenda and giving students individual choices. Though no formal evaluation has taken place yet, tutors' reflections on experiences gained to date suggest successful team working has been a key factor, and also keeping a focus on the customer has been an essential element throughout. Demands on staff time has been high, especially in managing the formative assessment which is an important part of learners' personal development on the programme¹². It is hoped to expand the programme and to involve another partner university in the future.

Another example of higher education working with a large, nationally spread employer on a tailored foundation degree is the development of Tesco's own foundation degree. In this case, the approach taken has been different, as the company has been working with two universities, University of the Arts London and Manchester Metropolitan University, within a more generic foundation degree framework being developed by the Retail Academy for the retail sector.

¹² Reported in more detail by Talbot J in 'Delivering distance education to modern government: the F4Gov programme' *Education and Training*, Vol 49, No.3, 2007

The Foundation Degree in Retail (Tesco) programme

Context, description and main purpose

This is a bespoke company programme due to be piloted in September, and planned to be rolled out nationwide (the pilot is UK but in only 40 stores). The target population for the new programme is staff identified as potential store managers, drawn from their departmental manager ranks and from within their A level options programme (that is their fast-track departmental manager training programme). It was initiated to help with meeting workforce needs and the recruitment and retention of store managers.

It is under development at two universities, University of the Arts London and Manchester Metropolitan University, The first intake of students for the pilot year September 2007 will be 40 students, split equally between the two universities, and recruited nationally. The FDEg will be awarded jointly by the two universities.

The FD programme is designed to be two years long and run mainly off campus and on-line. This is preferred by Tesco as staff are not taking time away for study. However, two on-campus sessions each term are built into the programme, so that students can meet their tutors, get some induction to study and information on the course, learn in a group environment, and be assessed. Students will study in their own time. They will draw off their own experiences in work, and it is expected that they will be familiar already with about 50 per cent of the material. Assessment will be done by the universities, to ensure quality control and consistency, and not likely to involve managers in the workplace, as they are not qualified to do so and it could be disruptive for the business. However, store managers will provide support to the students' learning and an in-store support network will be built up for students.

The successful recruits are expected to be people who have been identified as being likely to meet both the academic requirements of the programme and have the desire to progress within the company. Tesco are seeking to link the FDEg to their internal store management development programme.

Lessons learned so far

The prior experience of the two universities chosen to pilot the programme was important to the company. They both have a good reputation for providing other retail degree programmes and are involved with the Retail Academy, and the academic staff have experience of working in the retail industry. The company did not consider working with FE colleges as they preferred the status of a university partner.

Tesco have found that their engagement with higher education has been greatly helped by having a 'facilitator' in the form of an FDF manager. He provides employer support so that the two sides can work more easily together. This includes bridging the gap between the two cultures, 'translating' business needs into university-language, helping to speed up the process of getting a 'product' developed, especially getting it through the universities' rules and regulations.

Ways of working have been noticeably very different between the two partners, in particular the greater freedom in decision making and flexibility given to company compared to university staff. The speed of progress in developing the programme from initial design through the laborious system of accreditation has been much slower than the company expected at the outset (over 12 months) but it is on target for delivering a pilot start in September. This seems to have been due to the company not being made aware up front about any of the university procedures or processes that would have to be followed, and no clear objectives and timescales being agreed at the outset.

The pilot has been oversubscribed for places (approximately 170 are interested in participating to date). The company recognises the importance of selecting the right candidates who can succeed on what will be a demanding programme when combined with their work.

It will be interesting to see if this Tesco programme will be able to be delivered and awarded by other universities if it is rolled out nationally to all their stores across the country, or if it will stay with the two universities. There are no plans to do so at present, and it could prove too complex an undertaking and not worthwhile, though other universities may take up some of the on-line materials in their own retail degree programmes.

There are other foundation degrees which have been designed jointly with individual employers (eg in the health sector, aerospace) and for sectors (such as fashion design, early years) at a range of universities and colleges¹³. Most of these have involved large organizations. It has proved particularly difficult for universities to develop sustainable links for customised learning with small employers, for a number of reasons to do with small scale and unpredictability of their demand and often a lack of continuity from year to year. Most SMEs do not see higher education as being able to meet their learning needs; they are more likely to turn to local colleges or private training providers (or prefer informal learning approaches as shown in the example in section 3.5 below). As has been demonstrated in some of the examples shown above, HEIs will need to invest considerably more time in raising their profile, marketing and developing relationships with SMEs if they are going to have more success here. They also need to have the right skills and resources to do this kind of work well. Mistakes have often been made in the past which have proved costly– *'sending in the engineering faculty when IT and business solutions are called for, can prove highly counter-productive'*, a comment from a project at the Western Vocational Lifelong Learning Network in 2006. This employer engagement project (for developing new foundation degrees with local SMEs) also illustrated to the higher education staff involved, the complexity of the operations of many small businesses, and how managers in that sector often need to apply a wider range of skills and knowledge than in larger firms¹⁴. This meant challenges in curriculum design and packaging of their employer-specific programmes, as it meant 'criss-crossing' university discipline boundaries in, especially where 'buy-in' from a number of Schools was needed.

Part-time study taken by employees

While customised or individualised provision is a potentially growing area for HEIs in meeting workforce development needs, though various issues still need to be addressed as highlighted above, universities and colleges have opportunities to work regularly with employers on delivering work-based learning on full-time degrees (where students may be sponsored by their company, see recent UUK report¹⁵) and in part-time public programmes. Not all part-time study focused on employment or work has work-based learning components; this varies though most such provision has some work-based projects or assignments, or reflection on learning in the workplace built in to them in some way. This section focuses on some examples of successful part-time provision with a strong employer-demand focus but where the programmes are not as individually customised as in the previous section.

A large and established part-time programme specifically aimed at improving business performance through staff development has been run by Warwick University's Manufacturing Group (WMG) for many years. Here, employees take a period of part-time study at the Group's residential facility on the Warwick campus. The programmes are built around the WMG's 'Competitive Capability Framework'. This focuses on the functionality of the business units, rather than on what individuals 'need to know', in order to improve a business's competitive advantage.

¹³ More details of foundation degree programmes linked to employers can be found on Foundation Degree Forward's website – www.fdf.ac.uk

¹⁴ To read more about this project, see FDF's Forward Journal, Autumn 2006, p 20-23

¹⁵ Examples here are an American Express's masters at Sussex University; Price Waterhouse's BA degree in business accounting and finance at Newcastle University, in *'Higher level learning: Universities and employers working together'* Universities UK, 2006

The Warwick Manufacturing Group (WMG)'s Integrated Staff Development Programmes (ISDP)

Context, description and main purpose

This is a programme of industry-relevant part-time education which started up over 25 years ago to help manufacturing companies exploit changing technology within a developing global environment, through helping to develop their business strategy and the competences of their management and technical workforce. There are many long-standing customers, such as large companies like BAE Systems and AstraZeneca as well as newer smaller business in supply chain and innovative enterprises.

The model is of a 'intermediate institute' with a number of centres, technology, logistics, quality, systems etc as well as education which interact with, on the one hand, the university mainstream (its teaching and scholarship) and on the other, companies and employees, often via in-company projects. The Professional Programmes are based at the Arden House Post-Experience Centre, with residential accommodation of a high standard, located on the Warwick campus. They offer accredited modular-based postgraduate and post-experience programmes, plus some short unaccredited programmes.

Programmes offer a blend of formal tuition, self study and work-based learning. For example, the current part-time MSc programme will normally require between 2 and 3 years part-time study, with 12 modules to be taken each of approx 80-100 hours study. These are based around a number of five day residential programmes of lectures, seminars, practical activity, self-study, work-based learning and written assignments on a specific theme, put together in a way that best meets the learning objectives (intensive study, scheduled Mon-Fri, 8.30am – 7.30pm). Additionally, an industrially orientated project of a minimum of 900 hours work is required.

The post-experience programmes are made up of modules on specific topics but can be taken in shorter chunks than the MSc modules (2.5 days of direct tuition) plus 30 hours on a post-module assignment to embed the knowledge and understanding gained through applying ideas etc in the workplace. Each participant is required to take 9 modules to gain a Certificate, 16 for a Diploma, taking approx one every six weeks.

The Group has grown in size to some 480 staff and close associates, generating a £100m annual programme, working with over 500 businesses worldwide.

Lessons learned

At the outset WMG established a strong collaborative concept at the core, with both the University and companies jointly responsible for design, content, delivery and assessment of programmes. WMG also established at the outset a high reputation for academic excellence and business relevance. Because of the strong framework set up at its inception and its reputation for quality from business, changes to the programme can be made rapidly without a lengthy re-accreditation process.

All of the WMG teaching staff have industrial experience. A high proportion of teaching is done by company staff and specialist consultants - over half of the course material.

It is important to get the buy-in from participating companies, not just for fees or sponsorship for individuals but to commit at the start to allowing time release for participants to attend the programme and to working with the participant to achieve the learning outcomes (eg the employers are expected to select applicants appropriately, give support, help them to apply knowledge gained, etc). The industrial project is co-supervised and co-assessed by a senior company manager. Individuals also are expected to make a considerable personal commitment.

The modular structure of programmes allows participants to study in short bursts. Assessment is based on post-modular assignments and dissertation report, rather than written exams.

(Continued...)

The facilities of the Post-Experience Centre are of hotel/conference centre standard to meet the expectations of business managers.

There is plenty of choice of modules so the course is very flexible: a suite of over 100 modules are now offered, which can be built into a personalised programme for individuals and specific company needs. They can be built up into short courses for SMEs or whole programmes, and offered partly or fully bespoke. However, many of the programmes provided to businesses are now bespoke

A second example of how universities can provide courses which meet specific needs of businesses has been the development of the E-Skills UK's new degree – the Information Technology and Business Management Degree (ITMB). This was designed with the help of the Sector Skills Council's (E-Skills UK) Employer Strategy Forum comprising representatives from large companies both in the IT sector (like IBM, BT) and users (like BA, Unilever). The organisations also provide direct input to ITMB courses in the form of guru lectures. The new degree has been developed in response to continuing concerns from employers that ICT related degrees from UK universities are not sufficient to meet the industry's growing needs for graduates who also have business capabilities. Twelve universities now offer the new programme, mainly as full-time or sandwich courses, many of them via their Business Schools rather than traditional IT departments. One of them is the University of Greenwich, which runs the ITMB in a full-time mode at their Medway campus but also in a more accessible way from their Hastings campus, for students in work.

BSc Information Technology Management for Business (ITMB) degree initiative - University of Greenwich

Context, description and main purpose

This is a programme offered to students currently in IT jobs to enable them to get a degree qualification and help further their own development and careers. It has adapted the ITMB model, developed by the SSC e-skills in partnership with a set of large employers to provide a new degree that combined technical and business skills and knowledge with the development of interpersonal skills (or 'emotional intelligence'). It is seen as operating partway between a graduate training programme and a traditional degree. It has a strong problem-solving learning and personal development focus (25% of degree is interpersonal development) and requires a mix of face-to-face contact with academic tutors, in-work projects, guru lectures and self-study.

Greenwich has been offering this programme for people in work for the last two years as part of a SEEDA funded initiative to support local businesses and the public sector (the ITMB degree is offered now by 12 other universities but mostly as a full-time course).

To make it accessible to people in work, Greenwich has compressed the teaching and learning in the ITMB into one day on campus and put the rest onto e-platforms and e-mediated learning modes. Employers have to allow the students to take one day off a week to come to Greenwich's campus at Hastings for face-to-face tutorial and lecture activities and also agree to support them in the rest of the learning required in their work situation (or in combination with home or further on-campus study). The expectation is that this is approximately 21 hours study per week. In addition, the students have to attend the 'guru' lectures from senior executives, a specific feature of the ITMB model. These are drawn from the large employers who originally designed the ITMB, and occur every three or four weeks. In this Greenwich programme, they are delivered as a webcast so they can be watched from a PC at home or in the office (though the Hastings Centre hosts some of them).

This is an intensive programme for part-time students, which requires considerable commitment from students, to enable them to complete a degree in three years and some APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experience) is assumed. The degree is structured into blocks of 30 credits, each representing about 300 hours student study/work practice time. Some of the blocks have as much as 50% e-learning (computer mediated and self study) in the first year, rising to 75% in later years and 85% in their dissertation project. This is largely taken at a distance from the

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academic team, working in their own company with a mentor. The programme has attracted five students so far, three now in year 2, two in year 1, a smaller number than was expected. This is despite a large promotional exercise. The students are employed in a cross-section of jobs (IT) in public sector and private businesses in the local area. However, none of the employers of students are the employers who helped develop the ITMB programme originally and which specified its content in terms of generic technical and personal skills. Students range in age and seniority, and in prior qualifications and experience; but they all had to show that they were capable of meeting the challenge of the degree. Their employers had to agree to support them (in giving time off, but fees paid by bursary from SEEDA).

Lessons learned so far

There have been challenges of teaching a curricula which is focused on employment needs of students but was not actually designed by the employers of the students: it meant that the higher education staff have had to find ways of ensuring that the experiences the students can get in their jobs is sufficient and appropriate to give the learning opportunities needed to meet the generic skills and experience requirements specified in the ITMB model. This has been achieved through discussions between the students and higher education staff to work through any potential mismatches and adapt how the e-learning can be gained from their work situations.

The intensity of the programme for the first group of students has been felt to be considerable and probably more than it should be. *'An incredible strain on students trying to fit it into and around their day job'*. Most succeed in getting time off from their employers to come on to campus for a day a week or to do a day visit to another organisation or facility, but because they are very talented and committed individuals they tend to try to make up

the time. The higher education staff have tried to adapt the e-concept so as to reduce some of the pressures and to give them a more supportive on-line service. Lesson learned have been to regularise more the times for e-support, encourage more talking together in e-forums and encourage the students to ask for more help/reassure them they can do this. It has also become clear that someone who is not currently working in an IT job would not be able to take the course as they would be unable to do the coursework required in the workplace.

A significant amount of money had to be spent on advertising the new part-time programme – eg on local radio, internet, leaflets, cold calling on companies – and the numbers produced are still fairly small. This is partly because of the commitment needed from individuals to take this intensive programme, but also because not many employers are looking to support their employees at this level in this kind of learning. Public sector employers have given more support, possibly because they have more resources for employee development.

Other examples of where HEIs are gaining new business by meeting specific needs of certain industries through part-time provision is when they become approved suppliers for an industry's professional qualifications where previously this approval was only given to private sector bodies. One of these is the financial services industry which has a strong regulatory framework and much of its staff development needs is in compliance training. There has always been a range of approved professional examinations which individuals need to take to be able to work in certain business areas. These are regulated by the industry, such as investment management, stockbroking, international securities, bond dealing, etc. These exams have traditionally been offered only by private providers. Reading University has become the first UK university to meet approval from the Financial Services Skills Council (FSSC)'s new Securities and Derivatives exam standards. This is provided at its ICMA centre, in its IFID Certificate programme. It can be taken by part-time or distance study, though it can also be taken full-time and linked to a Reading first degree in finance. The ICMA centre at Reading is fully funded by the ICMA, the International Capital Markets Association, which is the regulatory body for the international securities trading business.

Accreditation of in-house programmes

While programmes purchased from external providers provide a significant element of workforce development, far larger sums are spent by employers on in-house development programmes for their staff, including high level staff. The 2006 CIPD survey¹⁶ showed that this was the most frequently used delivery method to develop their 'talent management', and the most effective method also (by 93 %). It was used most by larger organisations (over 250 employees), with smaller ones preferring more the use of coaching. Types of staff involved ranged from senior managers to graduates and technical staff. Most in-house schemes of this kind do not carry any accreditation in terms of external recognition of achievement, though some may link to professional qualifications (eg Chartered engineer, banking exams).

A number of universities and colleges have seen the potential in engaging with employers to develop this more. A few have developed a body of practice in the accreditation of in-house training programmes towards their own degree qualifications (eg Middlesex). But they recognise that the added value to employees and employers of doing this has not been established sufficiently from any research to date to justify them rolling out such schemes on a larger scale. Nor has much attention been given to it in higher education policy nationally. The recent Burgess proposals for a national system of academic credit in higher education in England, for example, do not give any mention as to how employer-based training or work-based students would be treated, nor much attention to credit to be given to non-higher education qualifications. However, it is expected that the QCA's new Framework for Achievement will have potential to develop this further as it should be aligned to the new higher education Credit Framework (NB this is in England; Scotland and Wales already have integrated national credit frameworks).

Among several pilots that have been funded to help encourage accreditation of in-company training and to test out how to overcome some of the barriers in doing so, was one at Teesside University. This was designed to give university accreditation to in-company development programmes of a number of small private sector employers in the local area. The aim was to help raise the awareness among such employers of this kind of opportunity and so help widen participation in higher education by encouraging employees to progress where needed to further study at the University.

Teesside University's Accredited Pathways to Excellence (APEX) Project

Context, description and main purpose

Accredited Pathways to Excellence (APEX) was an Aimhigher funded pilot project to accredit in-house training and so assist employers with their staff development, as a means of helping to widen and increase participation in higher education. The University felt that there was potential in attracting and developing new students from a previously under-investigated source - learners at work – who were often highly motivated.

A method for accreditation was established which fitted within the University's quality framework. It included individual's gaining credit for prior learning if appropriate and for taking University programmes on offer which had credits built in (making use of its Negotiated Learning programme experience), but the main thrust was to give existing in-company training programmes credit ratings. These would be based on a comparative mapping activity against suitable subject/module or a skill based set of learning outcomes that already existed within the University. Confirmation of the achievement to gain credit would be demonstrated through assessment procedures that ensured learning outcomes had been met; these had to be appropriate to the University credit being awarded and also relate to the learner's company work role.

A number of companies engaged with the programme, covering various sectors from engineering and transport through to healthcare and media. The extent to which their existing programmes matched with the relevant educational level descriptors varied. One of the most successful was a small retail company where eight of their staff embarked on a management development programme and were given credit awards from the University.
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¹⁶ Learning and Development Survey, 2006, CIPD

This was delivered in the company's own training centre facility by their own staff. It also included workshops, e-links to the University, and work-based assignments. It was accredited and quality assured by the University (a collaboration between its Centre of Lifelong learning and Business school). The company's first cohort of eight managers have gone through successfully, and received awards of a 60 credit, University Certificate in Advanced Professional Development (via the Business School).

The programme was free to participants in pilot stage, subject to certain criteria being met. A number of other smaller programmes were established which involved the University tailoring some of their existing programmes to meet specific needs, for example, in a nursery (where staff can build up to a 30 credit award in Early years) and in a fire safety training organisation (where its 2 employees have gained a 30 credit qualification in 'Developing People: Skills for Trainers').

Lessons learned

Companies participating learned that they could not use this project as a quick and easy way of getting academic credit for their training programmes. Success depended on having student's learning experience based on sound pedagogy with meaningful, appropriate assessment which enhanced work-based learning. There was also some initial opposition from within the University, where some Schools saw the project as an 'easy option', however, it soon became clear that it was not the case, especially when they saw the depth of learning in some of the work-based learning requirements, and so this was overcome.

The small retail company, which did not have much prior experience with higher education and does not have a 'graduate culture', has been pleasantly surprised with the outcomes for their staff who participated. They have all been promoted to their first manager post much more quickly as a consequence. They also found that they supported each other in their learning as 'buddies'. The University team involved found that much more support and explanation was needed in those companies where managers were not graduates or had not engaged with universities before; they had little notion of what was involved and were often confused by what was being offered by the University.

A considerable marketing effort was needed by the University staff. A large number of local companies were contacted (many by cold calling, both in person and on the telephone). The staff involved were surprised by how much more effort had to be put in to marketing than they had expected, and also to developing relationships with the employers. The latter took much longer than they were expecting. They also came to realise that not many of their staff could easily talk with employers (also have found this with other work-based learning work). There seems no best method of marketing, as different approaches have worked at different times (eg using colleges, local radio, personal calling on businesses).

The enthusiasm for the project's goals is still centred around a small number of committed staff in the Centre for Lifelong Learning and many of the Schools have not shown much interest in taking it forward after pilot funding finished. In particular, all of the APEL for this and the wider negotiated learning programme is still done in the Centre not the Schools (where it might be better to be located). The experiences have now been built into further projects as part of their Negotiated Learning Programmes (see above).

In addition to pilot projects like this, there have been a number of other 'accreditation of company learning' pilots. For example, UVAC and a group of universities in the National Validation Consortium (NVC) have been working over the last few years with two large employers on pilot programmes of accredited workplace learning – with GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) for chemistry graduates to achieve a postgraduate certificate award which would qualify them for a postgraduate certificate, and possibly a MPhil; and with BP Oil UK for a range of internal management training. Both are aiming to capture learning based on National Occupational Standards. Unlike the example above, GSK has had to be approved by the QAA as a provider of higher education learning, involving unexpected bureaucracy. This process was seen to be managed well by the NVC and UVAC consultants involved, who helped facilitate the project. The messages so far coming from the pilots suggest that some positive outcomes have been achieved to date though it is too early to evaluate success fully as the training and assessment materials developed have not been trialled fully nor any awards made. The concept of accredited training is supported by staff in the companies, and the training currently being designed is seen as good. Issues raised at

early stages have been dealing with the jargon (on both sides), agreeing common goals and setting realistic timescales. Here the importance of the consultants in the process (seen as 'official interpreters') has been recognised as key by the employer¹⁷.

Another example is a current initiative in the North West by Foundation Degree Forward (FDf) - the EBTA pilot (Employment-based Training Accreditation) - which it is hoped might be rolled out nationally in the future. This has built on earlier work done with the local Chamber of Commerce (St Helens) to establish the strength of employer demand for the enhancement and external validation of their internal training. FDf is now working with a number of organisations in the region to test out a methodology for EBTA whereby internal training at level 4 and above can be analysed and given notional credit value (CATS points), and employers can then have opportunity to get this validated by a local university (if they want to). At the same time, the universities are being encouraged to have the validation processes in place to be able to quickly and effectively respond to such employers. So far, the initiative is progressing well, though rather slowly, as it is a complex new system to develop with many partners, time-consuming at the early stages. Already, some familiar issues are being dealt with such as: the need for meaningful language to use with employers (not higher education-speak, like 'level descriptors'); the need to be clear on expectations of different partners at the outset '*not expect too much too quickly*'; for providers to be flexible; on the need to generate demand from employers from a variety of sources; and the value of having what they call an 'academic facilitator' to act as a critical friend' to the employer in the academic validation process and also work with HEIs¹⁸.

In all of the examples highlighted, costs to date have been met by Government in the pilot phases, but there is little mention as yet about what kind of cost or pricing strategies will be used to develop them further.

Progression from apprenticeships to higher education

An advantage already demonstrated by some of the examples highlighted above, in successfully promoting work-based learning solutions to businesses, is to try to align the learning to a company's internal career development and progression systems. Progression from apprenticeships to higher levels of learning within an integrated programme is an example of this.

Providing clearer vocational and work-based pathways to higher education has been part of Government policy for some time now, and good economic arguments are made for it, but numbers coming through the apprenticeship route are still small, even in the larger industrial companies where such progression (in the past to HNCs often) was a tradition for the 'better apprentices'. A number of barriers can get in the way, including:

- in higher education, unfamiliarity with apprenticeship schemes and uncertainty in admissions about the different standards being achieved;
- in giving careers advice to young people, uncertainty and confusion about what advice to give to individuals about the likelihood of being able to progress to higher education at the end of an apprenticeship;
- among employers, a perception that there are not relevant part-time courses available that fit with apprentices' jobs and even if there are, a reluctance to give employees time off to study;
- and among individuals, concerns about their ability to go on to university study or see the benefits of doing so¹⁹.

Recent development work by a consortium of organisations (including Foundation Degree Forward, Sector Skills Councils, LSC) have led to a number of pilot programmes for ex-apprentices to take foundation degrees on a part-time basis. But a significant new approach led by SEMTA, the Sector Skills Council for science, engineering and manufacturing technologies, has been the development of the 'Higher Apprenticeship Framework', which aims to integrate the development of skills and experience in the workplace with the gaining of a higher level qualification in an apprenticeship-style programme. Other sectors are also developing higher level integrated

¹⁷ See www.uvac.ac.uk, for further details presented at UVAC conference, November 2006

¹⁸ Further details of the EBTA initiative in the North West can be seen in FdF Journal article,

¹⁹ UVAC

frameworks, including the new IT higher apprenticeship programme, developed by e-skills and due to be piloted by BT and Accenture this year.

Higher Apprenticeship Framework in Engineering Technology

Context, description and main purpose

The Higher Apprenticeship Framework was designed to provide learners with clear pathways to gaining a higher education qualification through work-based learning. Its recognised advantage is that it could provide enhanced apprenticeship training and accelerated progress in the workplace, at lesser cost than traditional models of taking an apprenticeship and then a higher level qualification back to back. The Foundation degree and apprenticeship components are integrated into one programme. Learners can apply with either A-level qualifications or a BTEC (or equivalent at level 3), and take a programme route with various NVQs at levels 2, 3 and 4, Key skills at Level 3, and a Foundation Degree. On completion, they have the opportunity to register as professional Engineering Technicians or Incorporated Engineer with the Institution of Engineering & Technology. The first cohort of learners to complete the pilot programme (in Airbus UK) have been endorsed by their employer as being '100% work ready', with some learners progressing directly onto the third year of an honours degree.

The Engineering Framework development was led by SEMTA with partners including engineering employers and other organisations. The aerospace sector has been the main user of the DfES funded pilot programme, but recent further interest has come from the automotive, rail and energy sectors where the need for technicians and incorporated engineers with higher level skills is becoming a serious issue.

Lessons learned

The programme has gained widespread interest and support from employers in many engineering sectors because it is seen as a solution to engineering's growing skill needs at intermediate level, but it has experienced difficulties in getting take-up by employers on a large scale due to a number of practical difficulties. This is starting to change, but initial problems included:

- funding difficulties, as the costs to an employer are significantly greater than for other apprenticeship schemes, and a lower share of the total is met by the LSC (currently the funding model is being discussed further with the DfES). A particular issue is the reduced level of apprenticeship support received from LSC once learners reach 19 years.
- Difficulties with NVQ Level 4, where the holistic approach to assessment (very necessary at this level) is not fully understood, and has resulted in a resource intensive assessment method of each individual performance criteria. This is compounded by a shortage of personnel able to assess at NVQ4, and a demanding amount of work involved at level 4. There is a need to develop an easier model for assessing at level 4, and some work has started on developing better software for this, and also tracking progress of learners through the programme.
- The link to professional body registration has turned out weaker than expected, as it is not seen as being of much value to learners. SEMTA estimate that only around half of learners see the UK- Spec and/or professional registration as being of relevance to them; there are a lack of UK Spec mentors in the workplace to help the learners; and not all the UK-Spec is mapped to other standards (about 70% of higher apprenticeship learning counts towards it, the rest has to be got through 'further learning', which has not been defined by the Professional Institutions). A way of addressing this has been to link standards within the UK-Spec to other competencies and standards, which have more value in some sectors (such as sector specific license to practice), or to link them more into the Foundation Degree.

(Continued...)

The experience of Airbus UK, which has pioneered higher apprenticeship programmes, in partnership with Deeside College and North Wales Institute, has recently had its first 18 graduates. It is seen by the company as a valuable programme, but it is intensive for those involved and requires commitment from individuals to achieve the award. It is run as a three year programme, with the first year spent at college and the second two years on-site (with day release to take their FDeg). The recent graduates gained a NVQ4 in engineering management and a foundation degree in aeronautical engineering. Some of them also took part in the company's wider Intercultural Competence Programme where they obtained international experience.

Several regional *Aimhigher* schemes have given attention to concerns about going on to higher education study for work-based learners and the lack of a visible progression route as a barrier to progression: do they have the ability? How much will it cost? How long will it take? Will my employer support me? And so on are common questions. Their research has shown a lack of information and role models. As a consequence, several projects have developed mentoring materials and bridging programmes to help work-based learners progress to higher education and take foundation or first degrees or other qualifications. Two recent project have aimed to fill an information and advice gap in order to try to change a culture among training providers, employers, careers guidance staff and individual learners that significant numbers of level 3 work-based learners are capable of and should progress to higher education (if they complete the framework). Further details can be found in Action on Access report '*Policy that works: widening participation to higher education*', 2006, a brief summary is given below.

Apprentices Aimhigher Building pathways project in South Yorkshire and West Midlands: Get up and Go

Context, description and main purpose

These two projects aimed to fill an information gap. Most apprentices want to go straight to work once they finished their apprenticeships and have little knowledge of higher education, concerns about how they might cope, and what kind of income and employer support they might get if they did. Employers and training providers are often unsure about the suitability of local provision, and can hold perceptions that apprentices are not capable of level 4.

Focus groups were used to identify suitable case study materials on the benefits of progression. CD-ROMs, with interactive areas and video clips, showed learners making decisions about taking apprenticeships that progression to higher education is an option to consider. Links are included to other sites relating to careers in engineering and construction.

Lessons learned

Users in both projects feel the information packages have filled a gap; they are seen as high quality, and useful in an area where there is a dearth of resource materials. However, lessons have had to be learned on targeting the materials on different users and ensuring information is accurate. Also, the presentation has to be of high quality to make it accessible. The experience gained is that this requires significant resources to produce.

The 'iceberg effect' has also been recognised, that there is more under the surface to do in changing attitude and current behaviours. This includes fears of going away from home or moving into debt and persuading employers to support higher levels of work-based learning.

A number of different influencers, such as work-based assessors, can be key and need targeting by *Aimhigher*.

The materials developed are now being evaluated to see what modifications are required to give them national application.

(Continued...)

Non-accredited and informal learning.

In addition to much of the learning described so far, which has been mainly formally delivered by HEIs in accredited programmes (learners aiming for specific qualifications or credit towards some future award), there is a range of provision focused on employer needs which is *informally* delivered by universities and/or unaccredited. This comes in various forms: some can be seminars or workshops linked to R&D and innovation in specific advanced technologies (eg through the Knowledge House in North East Universities), others can be senior executive programmes where learning is shared in workshops, master classes or learning sets, and yet others can be in-house programmes such as those provided by Business Schools in Executive Development programmes. The Open University, for example, has recently developed a suite of new short non-accredited courses specifically targeting employees seeking post-qualification training and professional skills updating. The courses will be short and sharp – typically up to 30 hours in duration – and make use of a variety of multimedia - CD-ROMs, printed workbooks, conferencing and virtual learning environments.

Research has shown that SMEs do not want traditional products from higher education. They prefer more informal approaches to staff development, often seeing coaching and mentoring as being a more effective learning method than formal programmes. Some universities have worked with SMEs through informal learning networks, and in the example of one, at the University of Westminster, the value of ‘company learning’ in SMEs has been encouraged as a complement to, and part of, workforce development. There are several Knowledge and Business Development Networks, ‘KBDNs’, which the University has pioneered, some also covering other universities (see for example www.westfocus.org.uk - Westfocus in London). They can be one of the few ways of getting many SMEs to engage in learning with universities, thus helping to develop the skills of managers of SMEs, who are often owner/managers and entrepreneurs. The KBDNs operated by Westminster have considerable sector membership - more than 7,000 professional members across the digital media and music sectors, most working in SMEs.

Westminster University’s NMK learning network

Context, description and main purpose

University of Westminster contends that ‘company learning’ is complementary to and part of ‘workforce development’. Its ‘curriculum’ for specific industry sector businesses addresses company knowledge and development needs across four main ‘themes’: markets; product/service technologies and innovation; productivity; and company growth. Its learning and knowledge acquisition programmes and activities are not delivered in the form of teaching discrete skills to individual workers. Those participating in the learning programmes enhance their knowledge and professional skills across a number of company-focussed development issues. It uses peer-to-peer and higher education knowledge input to address and deliver company knowledge and development needs. They call this ‘network learning’ gathered by industry professionals and practitioners through use of the web-enabled knowledge (eg www.nmk.co.uk) and participation at network events, workshops, conferences and bespoke short courses.

In their network for the interactive digital media industry (NMK), the University has developed a learning market for sector specific SMEs and professionals located in London and its surrounds. The NMK network, which was established ten years ago, now has some 6,000 company and practitioner members. The learning and knowledge acquisition opportunities provided in the network enable owner/managers and industry professionals to make business improvements, improve competitiveness and add to the bottom line. The University considers this to be a ‘company learning’ focus achieved through individual professional development and knowledge acquisition. This form of knowledge network was conceived by the University’s enterprise director as a probable effective way to build an industry sector learning community with two way and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange. It resonates too with cluster theory in relation to sector development. It also provides a route to integrating company and industry knowledge into academic studies.. Owner managers and senior managers in SMEs in targeted sectors are a particular focus.

(Continued...)

Lessons learned

Companies and practitioners pay a 'market bearing' rate for attendance at the different events and courses, so direct revenue is earned in order that the University might meet all 'off-site' event and course costs without subsidy. Nonetheless, 'cash and time poor' SMEs by themselves are not able to meet network infrastructure operating costs, even though they may pay several hundreds of pounds to come to a workshop or course. Whereas occasional grants have been secured from the LSC and LDA and (limited) corporate sponsorship also is secured, the University has had to use internal funds and grants to subsidise its sector knowledge networks.

At present all learning, whilst facilitated by the University, is informal, so it does not follow standard pedagogy and the University to date has not developed a methodology for its accreditation. As a result the informal learning *network* is fragile. The learning input is less structured than it could be and the absence of a learning and assessment methodology implemented with the participating companies is felt by the University staff involved to significantly weaken the learning outcomes. The full potential to enhance company competitiveness, productivity and sustainability is not yet being exploited.

The assessment is focused on output of benefit to the companies (such as internal business efficiencies and improvements, exploitation of new markets or technologies). The University has been reluctant to adjust the NMK knowledge network methodology to fit 'mainstream' university accreditation procedures and processes and so disturb the prime purpose, which is to enable company (and sector) competitiveness through network learning. The University has not yet found the resources to assess the use of these learning inputs within companies and so assess the learning outcomes. It is hoped that these issues might be pursued via its HEFCE funded CETL (Centre for Excellence in Professional Learning from the Workplace).

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