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## **University Challenge: Learning to Work with Employer engagement**

Barbara Workman      Director, Centre for Excellence in Work Based Learning, Middlesex University

A number of reports have emerged from government and business recently which have set the employer engagement agenda for the HE sector. It is not the intention of this article to discuss these reports (a list of key ones are to be found at the end), but to draw on some common themes and identify what they might mean for those who are tasked with making HE programmes employer and academia friendly. This article will outline the context of employer engagement and consider some of the issues of workforce development and the consequent impact upon work based learning (WBL) programmes and opportunities. ...

### **Key drivers**

Working with employers is not new and in this time of recession, effective collaboration between HE, business and government sectors is considered to be critical in achieving economic recovery and international competitiveness. Some HEI's are more effective at engagement than others and there are a variety of working models, practices and demonstrator projects currently being undertaken (HERDA 2009). The recent CBI report Stronger Together (2009a) makes it very clear that funding HE is not the prerogative of the government alone, but that businesses should be developing reciprocal partnerships with HE and contribute experience in the form of work placements and funding to contribute to developing the workforce of the future, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM). Peter Mandelson's recent report from the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS November 2009) make it clear that the government is expecting a cultural shift between the HE and business sectors to, amongst other things; widen access and opportunity; include more learning for and at work to contribute to economic recovery and growth; to shorten degree courses from three to two years whilst retaining excellent standards and enhance employability, as well as strengthening the research capacity of universities to contribute to the economy. Much of this is expected to happen through meaningful and productive partnerships which will involve not just funding but also programme development for work and academia.

Organisational and business development needs of the future have been identified as needing 'higher level' skills (which should not be confused with employability skills). These higher level skills are those graduate skills at level 4 (FE/HE NQF) and above which are the academic skills that all graduates should qualify with, such as the ability to analyse, problem solve, and evaluate information and to research, investigate and manage complexity and variable contexts. However, the employability skills of graduates are also of concern, which are those transferable attributes that will enable graduates to work in a variety of industries that may not reflect their initial subject discipline, but enable them to function effectively within a work environment. These include effective communication and literacy skills, business and customer awareness, understanding the context of the working environment and self management, working in teams, problem solving etc (CBI 2009a). All the reports have identified that if businesses want certain attributes then a contribution is expected in return, not least in work experience, placements and internships, but also in funding, sponsorship and investment. Ideally employers from all sectors and organisational sizes should be willing to contribute to an educational economy that prepares their future workforce.

However, universities can offer development for the current workforce and it is considered that this is under utilised by organisations. Much staff development occurs in-house, and has been recognised as more effective than other staff development approaches although often not delivered through HE but more usually through private and other education providers (CIHE 2008). Large sums are spent each year by organisations on developing their staff, but there is little structured and considered evaluation of effective outcomes or value for money, and HE is rarely seen as a potential provider of such development, so that it is anticipated that there is a large untapped HE market in skills training, particularly at management level. University accreditation of in-house training is appreciated by individuals and increasingly organisations are seeking this recognition as a way of rewarding staff development and commitment. Additionally it can be a valuable route into Foundation Degrees and other short awards equivalent to HE level, thus promoting progression into HE thus widening access and participation of non traditional students.

### **Types of work based learning**

Incorporated into this is the notion that types of WBL have a significant contribution to make to the employer engagement agenda. There are a number of modes of WBL, for example; vocational placements and courses; internships; sandwich years, or general work experience from part time or seasonal work where the learner is primarily a student with such work experience contributing to their general employability attributes. Very often these modes are considered appropriate only for vocational subjects as part of professional preparation. Additionally, other forms of work based learning where the learner is employed and studying part time are also prevalent. These learners often undertake qualifications such as Foundation degrees or NVQs where the employer specifies the content in order to prepare the worker for a specific organisational role. Full time workers often undertake post qualifying study that is relevant to their role such as MBA's, teaching certificates or advanced professional courses. Another type of work based learning is that where the learner negotiates their own programme, with work itself becoming the focus of learning and inquiry.

Boud & Solomon (2001) identify this negotiated programme as one which involves partnership between HE and the organisation, and which recognises both formal and informal learning. It usually involves a negotiated learning contract acknowledging the learner's needs and experience as well as the organisation's needs, but the learner is the starting point so that the programme is designed accordingly. It often involves significant work place projects which contribute to the intellectual capital of the learner and the human capital of the organisation (Garnett 2009). The values that HE ascribes to this are the validation framework and quality assurance processes which provide the framework and are the HE unique selling point to the organisation. This model is one which is used by Middlesex University's Employer Engagement project involving the Institute of Work Based Learning (IWBL). Other modes of WBL are used within the other subject disciplines.

### **What employers want**

Whatever form of WBL approach is taken employers want their workforce development to meet specific criteria. Primarily improved performance of both individuals and the organisation is a strong driver as well as retention of high level skilled workforce. Some organisations express concern that staff development will result in staff leaving, but our experience is that workers become re-

motivated and contribute more effectively, as well as growing in confidence and skill. Flexible accredited short courses are also popular with employees, particularly if credits can be accrued towards an HE award such as a Foundation degree or Post graduate award. Developing these can be particularly challenging to universities as experience has shown that accreditation documentation is written for and by academics, using academic jargon with unrealistic expectations of organisational training departments. Additionally, HE expect that validation processes will be understood by businesses which are used to responding to sudden changes in market forces and are totally unprepared for the convoluted validation processes associated with HE (HEA 2008), thus leading to a mismatch of expectations which can be an area for disenchantment in the relationship. Speed and responsiveness are expected of HE, so the accreditation process has to be designed to be flexible enough to satisfy university requirements as well as business expectations. Accreditation of in-house programmes cannot be managed in the same way as validation of university programmes and processes have to be designed to reflect the extra flexibility required.

Employers also want bespoke courses, not recycled modules that are the academics pet subjects, and on site delivery, often outside the academic calendar, usually with assessments that ensure practice is safe and effective. The content needs to be relevant to work practices, and if it carries professional body recognition, that too adds credibility. Universities that can meet some of these challenges have also had to make changes in their expectations, not of academic ability so much as academic practices. New knowledge that has to be tried and tested in the workplace within twenty four hours adds immediacy and connectedness to practice that traditional academia rarely offers, and can prove invigorating for some. Academics who have recent experience in the workplace in certain disciplines can adapt more speedily than others and when recruiting academics for this type of role, relevant work experience is extremely valuable, together with insights as to transferability of learning, for example from a range of module options and combinations. The right individual can add considerable weight and influence from HE through his or her credibility in the workplace.

### **Accreditation**

Another form of accreditation which employers and employees value is that of APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning) or RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning), as it reduces duplication of learning time. This has been mainly used in mainstream HE as a mode of advanced entry into standard programmes, but is often perceived as cumbersome and time consuming to do, costly to assess, and not necessarily equivalent to HE. It has also been used extensively as a tool for social justice in some countries (Andersson & Harris 2006). With the current government agenda seeking to widen access for organisational learning, revisiting APEL processes and practices within organisations will offer a wider an alternative approach for some, but practices may need to be streamlined to improve efficiency. Ingenious ways of using APEL in employer facing programmes may make a significant contribution to employer engagement projects.

### **Assessment**

Assessment is another area that requires a different perspective in employer engagement. The organisation may start with requesting exams, which for some discipline knowledge is partially acceptable. As academics know, assessment defines the student's learning activities (Biggs 2003), and exams tend not to extend and embed knowledge as effectively as other qualitative approaches. Consequently discussions regarding outcome expectations, required changes in performance and

competence usually result in changed assessment activities. Assessment failure within the workplace may have more dire consequences than in HE as being unable to meet competences has implications for a job role, which employers may need to factor into their organisational strategy. Undertaking projects within the workplace can benefit both HE and the organisation, as many employees are already undertaking projects and can use them for both academic and work purposes, and the academic contribution can strengthen the project knowledge content and activities. Experience in this area has resulted in IWBL developing a pilot programme that uses work projects as a starting point for organisational development. Other examples of assessment can include case studies, simulations, presentations, audits, portfolios and competency frameworks. All these are relevant for students who have work experience, placements, or internships incorporated into their programmes. However assessment is conducted it is valuable to consider its contribution to the learning outcomes.

Boud is developing assessment approaches that enable learners to develop the capacity to judge their own work, and is designed to be sustainable by focusing on higher order knowledge and skills within the context of learning, and therefore contributing to future evaluations of practice, both for individuals and with peers. Visit [www.assessmentfutures.com](http://www.assessmentfutures.com) for further information.

### **Working in partnership**

Effective engagement with employers means developing sustainable partnerships, which requires time, effort, resources and continuing commitment. A vital resource is that of 'translator' who is able to understand and interpret the language from both communities and who can liaise and manage the relationship. Specific contact points within the university and organisation can save hours of frustration trying to find the right person to talk to, so someone with networking skills, who understands HE processes and procedures, has skills in customer care and understands the particular sector is also invaluable. These skilled individuals can be hard to find and develop and may need careful nurturing. The health sector has extensive experience of working with contracts that have to be managed, both for students and qualified staff development, as well as placement areas where supervisors and mentors require training and development in order to facilitate learners effectively. For many HEIs these are resources already available that have skills and knowledge that can be effectively shared.

Work placements and experience can be extremely valuable for students and is a good way of building relationships with organisations and offering staff development opportunities. However, experience suggests that not all programmes really consider how to maximise learning opportunities. Increasingly work placements have credit values attached to them, but this is not common practice. More worryingly is the practice of including a work placement in a programme, but with little preparation or guidance for the students as to the purpose of the placement, what they should be looking out to learn, what is expected of them and how it will contribute to their final award.

Preparation, employability explicitly, incorporation into programme outcomes, technical skills, teamwork, work project, own experience of having a student placement where he didn't know he had to do a project, charging the student for it when not offering any support, health and safety issues,

## References and further reading

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