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Introduction

This special edition is focussed on the issues that surround putting work-based learning into practice in the United Kingdom. Inevitably defining the territory is essential. In higher education work-based learning is increasingly recognised as a field of study. Work-based learning, Costley (2001) argues enables higher education to incorporate, in particular, the learning people do, for, in and through work into the learning provided. She draws our attention to the longevity of engagement in work based learning in the sector:

> “Some universities have been involved in work based learning for a long time, for example, through placements and sandwich courses. Some universities have structured courses where continuing professional development with the knowledge gained through experience is accepted implicitly. Others use the processes of accrediting prior and experiential learning (APEL) to formally recognise such knowledge…..Learning contracts are becoming familiar instruments. These activities are variously described as work based, work related, placement activities, elective modules, independent study, APEL, reach out, CPD, work based learning among others. It is worth noting that work based learning in higher education is nearly always part of an existing university programme with its own disciplinary frameworks and approaches to higher education. Learning outcomes and criteria for assessment are therefore within the subject knowledge born of research and scholarly activities that already are embedded in the universities” (Costley, 2001)

This definitional position informed the selection of papers drawn from the timely 2006 University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) Annual Conference. UVAC, an international membership organisation has championed higher level vocational learning, particularly higher education engagement with employers and the workforce, and the selection of conference papers demonstrates the seriousness with which higher education educators are taking this work forward. The key question addressed in the conference, and many of the papers explored through their practice, was ‘how is work based learning put into practice through close engagement with employers and without compromising on quality?’ This is increasingly important to educators and researchers in further and higher education, as the UK national government higher education policy moves further towards meeting employer needs as a means of addressing global competitiveness. This was most recently exemplified in the Leitch Review of Skills (HM Treasury, 2006).

It is worth briefly exploring the background to the present circumstances.

A brief history of universities and employer engagement

Waterhouse (2002) seeks to explain employer engagement by focussing our attention on technical education as the point of contact. He suggests that "A fundamental part of education, wherever it occurs, is technical. Technical education is not simply practical, it is about particular types of action to make and manipulate physical things. Technical learning begins at birth. Technical education as a specific social institution began when techniques had reached a certain level of complication and sophistication." This gave birth in Europe to the apprenticeship system, with its overlay of secret knowledge and mystique. In spite of the printing press, the computer, and communications technology, the restrictive practices of these mediaeval guilds are still with us – known today as professional bodies or associations such as the General Medical Council, the Law Society or the Institute of Civil Engineering. This concept of technical education as a social institution has often been distinguished from vocationalism; "a vocation is a calling, and the highest vocation, certainly in Europe, is to the priesthood and the European universities were invented to deliver vocational education in the strictest of senses. They were set up by the Church to train clerks, i.e. clerics. Indeed, all the great civilizations of the old world had similar institutions with an identical purpose" (Waterhouse, 2002). These origins are still evident today in the oldest universities. They were essentially the training colleges of their day.

The classic model of the late mediaeval university was the Sorbonne in Paris. Like other European universities the Sorbonne had four faculties; the lower faculty, the Faculty of Arts, generally trained young men in the skills of the clerk (church employee) and the three higher faculties were those of theology, medicine and laws. The whole purpose was vocational, with the degree as a license to practice and the doctorate as a license to teach. However, much of this seems to have been forgotten. Medicine, laws and theology as subjects worthy of study were the equivalent of the creative industries today.

As Waterhouse (2002) points out, "universities in the early modern period were in no sense technical. They were about language, social interaction, beliefs and ideologies. They were not about making things or manipulating the physical world by action. (This even applied faculties of medicine. If a surgeon was needed, you visited a barber not a doctor.) By the 18th century the universities were largely moribund, their social function having become the perpetuation of the aristocratic elite."

In 1792 the Legislative Assembly of the French Revolution abolished the Sorbonne and three years later the Hautes Ecoles were established. They were dedicated to practical and technical learning - astronomy, geometry, mechanics, applied arts, natural history, medicine, veterinary science and rural economy, the new industries of their day - comparable to media studies or business and

management. These actions were indicative of an explosion in technical knowledge during the 17th and 18th centuries, which had occurred almost entirely outside the universities. Investigation, experimentation and learning had largely taken place without formal structures or teaching institutions; the Hautes Ecoles were designed to help put this technical knowledge into practice and fuel the Industrial Revolution.

However, the French model of the Hautes Ecoles did not sweep across Europe. With the notable exception of the University of Berlin, under Von Humboldt, existing universities were slow to change. Industrialists, Princes or enlightened regimes found it easier to establish new institutions of higher technical learning than to change the power structures of the universities. So, for example, in England in the mid-19th century we saw the foundation of the University of London and the first of the civic universities, often driven (for reasons of public health) by the medical school. Elsewhere in Europe colleges of mines, engineering, and commerce were being established. Later we had the development of technical schools and colleges; these were specialised professional schools for teachers, nurses, artists and designers, all of which eventually went to provide the heritage of the English polytechnic system.

None of these types of institution had degree-awarding powers, though various professional diplomas were created. Throughout the course of this development the word “vocational”, like the word “professional”, was used to give dignity and status to practical, socially useful, and in some cases technical, activities.

The next stage of evolution, as suggested by Waterhouse (2002), requires universities to re-conceptualise themselves as a service industry, not a priesthood of occult technology, or a restrictive academic guild. In place of the student and teacher come the customer and facilitator of learning. Replacing the campus is the distributed system which technology enables institutions to extend into the workplace.

Consequently, the ultimate value proposition for universities, Waterhouse argues, “is not that they can teach, nor even that they can sell research, but that they can assess: they accredit learning and are awarding bodies. It is this social certification of successful learning that individuals, employers and ultimately society pay for.” The next reinvention for the sector is contemporary vocationalisation and responsiveness to economic imperatives rather than learning. So what is being said here is that universities have engaged in a form of vocationalisation and that technical needs of business have generally been met outside the system, although the universities have engaged in the practice of the new industries. This leads us naturally to the consideration of the knowledge and learning transfer activities of universities as a means of contributing to the economy, particularly workforce development which requires employer engagement.

A contemporary context for Higher Education Employer Engagement in the United Kingdom

A trilogy of New Labour Green and White papers focusing on 14 to19 year olds - the Future of Higher Education (DfES, 2003a), 14-19: Opportunity and Excellence (DfES, 2003b) and the Skills Strategy (DfES, 2003c) - has determined the contemporary policy climate for UK vocational education and training private organisations, employers, schools, further and higher education and, noticeably, for the workforce development role required of institutions. The progression expectation, often articulated as the "joined up" policy component, to meet earlier lifelong learning ambitions and economic imperatives articulated by Fryer (1997) and DfEE (1999) in the late 1990s is continued by Clarke, Johnson, Lewis and Randall today[1]. As Swailes and Roodhouse (2003) have pointed out these concerns are neither party political or new. The issues are best described by an extract from a Conservative Government White Paper, "Working Together, Education and Training" (1986), which focused its attention on the need to co-ordinate training, education and qualifications for all people to ensure a competent workforce in Britain for the 21st century:

> "Qualifications and high standards are not luxuries; they are necessities, central to securing a competent and adaptable workforce. Economic performance and individual job satisfaction both depend on maintaining and improving standards of performance. This applies from the boardroom to the shop floor. It applies as much to adult training and re-training as to young people starting off in life"

Keep (2006) explains this new found interest in qualifications as:

> "The assumption is that, all other things being equal, the country with the most skilled workforce, as proxied by stocks of qualifications, will enjoy higher levels of competitiveness and productivity and therefore support a higher standard of living. Where our stock of qualifications proportionally falls short of those in competitor countries, the norm is to ascribe this in part to market failure. We then establish targets and other forms of public policy intervention to remedy the perceived deficiency. Such thinking has underlain the National Education and Training Targets (NETTs), their successors - the LSC's National Learning Targets (NLTs) and the government's main VET-related Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets."

Until 2002 Conservative and New Labour Government education and training policy was measured through the National Learning Targets. The 1995 annual report on Progress Towards National Targets provides a typical illustration of this

[1] All New Labour Ministers in DFES responsible for skills, further and higher education

approach with inclusion of traditionally academic with occupationally specific qualifications into the National Learning Targets:

- Foundation target 3: by 2000, 50% of young people to reach NVQ level 3[2] or equivalent

In fact, the report claims that 41% of young people, up to and including aged 21, have achieved either 2 GCE A-levels, an NVQ/SVQ level 3 or vocational equivalent.

- Lifetime target 3: by 2000, 50% of the workforce qualified to at least NVQ level 3 or equivalent

It is also claimed that 40% of the workforce is qualified to a least 2 GCE A-levels, NVQ/SVQ level 3, its vocational equivalent, or a higher qualification.

Many of these targets for education training, initially established in 1991, were re-presented by the National Skills Task Force (2000) as new objectives which subsequently influenced the 2003 Skills Strategy proposing outputs that focus on adult literacy and level 2, at the expense of the level 4 NVQ:

- By 2010, reduce the proportion of adults with low levels of literacy and numeracy from just over 20% to 10%

- By 2010, increase the proportion of 25 year olds with a level 3 qualification from 41% to 70%

- By 2010, increase the proportion of the adult workforce with level 2 qualification from 68% to 80%

This economic imperative continues to be reinforced at every level with, for example, the introduction of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs)[3], the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) and the Skills for Business network, all of which are expected to resolve the UK skill and productivity gap. The SSDA specifically suggests the up-skilling of the existing workforce as being a priority over entry provision. The above agencies replace the earlier National Training Organisations (NTOs) and National Training Organisation National Council (NTONC) which in turn were born out of industry training organisations (Jones, 2000), industry lead bodies and even earlier industry training boards established in 1964. It was concluded by the National Skills Taskforce (2000) that:

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[2] National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) entered the UK's education and training arena in 1986. Five levels with descriptors were created in the NVQ framework to capture the competence including the knowledge required to perform basic operations (level 1) up to complex, unpredictable, strategic tasks (level 5). It is suggested by QCA that Level 4 broadly equates with undergraduate level study and level 5 with post graduate study.

[3] Sector Skills Councils, government funded employer led organisations, have replaced national training organisations responsible for meeting the skill (training) needs of employers and employees in their designated industrial sector.

> “The work over the last two years to rationalise the number of NTOs and raise their capacity has been very welcome, but we do not believe it has gone far enough. There are still in our view too many NTOs leading to confusion for employers and to organisations that are in some cases still too small to undertake the full range of responsibilities we believe is necessary”

The rationale for change seems remarkably similar to New Labour’s justifications for their action:

> “A recognition that the UK needed to raise levels of competence in the workforce, in order to maintain and enhance competitiveness and its position as a highly skilled, innovative and technologically advanced nation state, reinforced the requirement to reform an archaic 19th century training and qualification system which had lost touch with the needs of employers. By the 1970s, both the British and US economies faced strong competition from nations using the similar production technologies but with much lower manufacturing costs, particularly labour. Government concern about falling competitiveness stimulated reviews by the then Manpower Services Commission (MSC, 1981) which underlined the need for a flexible and skilled workforce that could respond to global economic changes.” (Swailes and Roodhouse, 2003)

What is brought into sharp focus in these targets is the lack of reference to higher education and its traditional role in educating and training those wishing to enter the workplace. However, with the government introduction of mass higher education and a target - “participation in higher education towards 50% of those aged 18 - 30 by the end of the decade” (DfES, 2003a:Ch. 5) - the intention behind this approach, it seems, is to increase the quality of the workforce, keep abreast of international competition and create more opportunity.

With mass higher education, progression resurfaces as an explicit government requirement linked to access and widening participation. However, the interpretation of progression has tended to be limited to a concept of school to further and/or higher education with hardly any discernible recognition of progression through learning at work. Identification of this failing has, relatively recently, led to Learning and Skills Council (LSC), Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and DfES initiatives such as Lifelong Learning Networks, the Partnership for Progression and Aim Higher to “plug” this gap. The LSC focuses particularly on further education funding, the funding of workforce development, modern apprenticeships, national traineeships and training targets, established as a result of the White Paper on Post-16 Learning (DfEE, 1999).

The Green Paper considering 14 to 19 year olds, places increasing emphasis for young people on clearly defined and recognised vocational routes in and through

schools, modern apprenticeships, and further education. This aims to remove "the notion of leaving education at 16" (DfEE, 1999) and encourages entry into vocational higher education, particularly Foundation Degrees (DfEE, 2000; HEFCE, 2000). It suggests that the gateway to higher education should be changed from GCE A level to a UK version of the International baccalaureate, the Advanced Diploma (Tomlinson, 2002).

Foundation Degrees form the centerpiece of the government policy response to the intermediate labour market skills gap in the UK as described by the DfES (2003a).. Similar in many ways to the Associate Degree in the United States of America conceived by the National Skills Task Force in 1999, foundation degrees are intermediate vocationally specific qualifications awarded by UK higher education institutions with degree awarding powers. They are expected to be designed in collaboration with employers, use national occupational standards (employer standards of competence) where possible, include work experience and provide a progression route to an honours degree. This qualification is seen as the higher education response to meeting the workforce skills gap at the higher levels and contributes to the intention of the DFES Skills Strategy:

> "to ensure that employers have the right skills to support their businesses, and individuals have the skills they need to be both employable and personally fulfilled." (DfES, 2003b)

The Strategy sets out proposals to link and co-ordinate the work of a range of government agencies; the Learning and Skills Council, the Sector Skills Development Agency, Sector Skills Councils, the Small Business Service, Business Link and Regional Development Agencies. Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) were established under the Regional Development Agencies Act (Great Britain, 1998) with an agenda to include regional regeneration, regional inward investment and working with regional partners to ensure the development of a regional skills action plan. With the exception of Business Link, these are all agencies created by successive New Labour administrations which has had the cumulative effect of weakening the 'joined up' policy approach, hence the need for coordination in the Skills Strategy.

In addition, the Skills Strategy confirms the importance of further education in improving the skills and knowledge of the workforce particularly at levels 2 and 3. It also reinforces the importance of modern apprenticeships, Foundation Degrees, and the role of Sector Skills Councils in determining the match between skills, demand in the workplace, and the supply of learning from further and higher education.

It should also be noted that the Learning and Skills Council has been given primary responsibility for workforce development with the Workforce Development Strategy (LSC, 2002) setting objectives including raising informed demand for employment related skills, supporting improvements to the

responsiveness of the supply side, and contributing to the development of a better skills and labour market intelligence framework to improve links to the wider educational agenda. Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), on the other hand, have a primary responsibility to develop the regional economy to create and sustain jobs, businesses, quality and standard of living with the exception of higher education, and includes initiatives such as modern apprenticeships.

What becomes glaringly obvious from the 1980s onwards is the failure of successive governments, including the present administration, to connect meeting employer need with the coherent provision of quality learning at all levels, including further and higher education. This in part may be due to the artificial public policy split between training and education provision. This has been compounded by continuous structural change even though the social and economic imperatives have remained largely consistent throughout, since 1945. At least the examples of practice described in the following articles begin to demonstrate the seriousness of intent by higher education practioners to find workable solutions to this long established and embedded issue.

The articles in this Special Issue of Education & Training explore these themes. It is perhaps no surprise to find that foundation degrees are the focus of attention with several examples of designing and delivering this new higher education degree with its complex interactions with employers, delivery in the work place, assessment regimes and quality assurance requirements, not least cultural clashes. They are after all the newest qualification to be delivered by higher education. In this sense it is to be expected that the authors are still exploring issues and describing activity as part of their reflective learning process.

Health and social work figure strongly as disciplines where work based learning and individual competence is essential. In part this is due to public sector requirements for qualified staff particularly at intermediate levels. Assessment forms a major component of any qualification and assessment in the workplace challenges the traditional methods and quality assurance arrangements in higher education. These issues are explored from different institutional perspectives.

It is worth noting that many of the papers draw heavily from their individual institutional perspectives which reflect the distinctiveness of higher education in the United Kingdom. It is a sector of individual institutions with discrete missions often operating in the same occupational fields such as social work or early years education and designing autonomous solutions. This special edition is intended to encourage a sharing of practice and learning from each other.

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