

Connectivity and responsiveness to vocational higher education to promote workforce development

The University Vocational Awards Council: the present view

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Abstract

This paper sets out to explore the case for higher education engagement with workforce development with reference to media studies in the light of recent government policy initiatives including the trilogy of White Papers, *14–19 Years*, *The Skills Strategy*, and *The Future of Higher Education*. It focuses on the problems and potential solutions to establishing an accredited work-based learning route supported by further and higher education as a major contribution to the knowledge economy. It is inevitable in any analysis of higher education and workforce development that consideration has to be given the nature of the qualification framework and the current schizophrenia between the national qualification framework led by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education framework. Until this unconnected and disjointed approach to a national qualification framework is resolved it will not be possible to establish coherent credit accumulation and transfer schemes all encouraging extensive use of accreditation of prior learning and experience in the workplace. Higher education, particularly subject disciplines with a direct interest in occupational sectors such as media have no choice but to engage in workforce development. However, this highlights the difficulties of providing a relevant education with the demands of employers often articulated through sector skills councils such as Skillset. The University Vocational Awards Council which is a consortium of 74 higher education institutions and the largest of the further education colleges devoted to higher level vocational education and training, sets out the general arguments for engagement with workforce development, sketches a way forward and indicates a potential role for the Association of Media Practitioners in Education.

Keywords

workforce development, vocational, higher education, qualifications, connectivity

Biography

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Introduction

A trilogy of White Papers in 2003, *14–19 Years*, *The Skills Strategy* and *The Future of Higher Education*, have determined the climate for UK vocational education and training in higher education, particularly the role that can be undertaken by institutions in workforce development.

The *14–19 Years* White Paper places increasing emphasis on clearly defined and recognized vocational routes through school, modern apprenticeships, further education and entry into vocational higher education for young people.

Foundation degrees form the centrepiece of the government policy response to the intermediate labour-market skills gap in the United Kingdom described in *The Future of Higher Education* White Paper. *The Skills Strategy* confirms the importance of further and higher education in improving the skills and knowledge of the workforce particularly at levels 2 and 3. It also reinforces the importance of foundation degrees, and the role of sector skills councils including Skillset in determining the match between skills demand in the workplace and the supply of learning from further and higher education.

Combining knowledge and skills to achieve vocational excellence has been a fundamental part of university life then and now. It is essentially the everyday business of higher education today: training teachers, lawyers, doctors, engineers, social workers, and health and media professionals. Professor Roger Waterhouse in 'Widening Participation and the

Distributed University' (University Vocational Awards Council annual conference proceedings 2002) powerfully argues that we are bound up in structure and have forgotten the value of universities:

The oppositions between theoretical and practical study, between academic and vocational education, are not born of some necessary structures in the ways in which people learn.

Still less are they born of some typology of human beings (those who think, and those who do). They are the residuum of institutional structures, which are not only out of date but inhibit our collective learning process.

The ultimate value proposition for universities is not that they can teach, nor even that they can sell research, but that they can assess. They accredit learning.

Whatever position is adopted with regard to these policy papers, there is no doubt that it provides a genuine opportunity for higher education to strengthen its relationship with work-based learning and improves access to higher education.

Why should higher education do it?

There are challenging choices for individual higher education institutions and those that work within them as to whether it is worthwhile in social, educational, financial and economic terms to respond to this changing, largely English policy environment.

For some, research is the inevitable focus for individuals and organizations, whilst others will increasingly concern themselves with entry-to-work learning programmes and workforce development at local, regional, and national levels. There are significant drivers which inevitably influence the ambition and consequent activities of the individual higher education institution in arriving at a position where there is a corporate commitment to the skills and workforce agenda. These can be briefly described as:

- A 50 per cent target is a government imperative (*The Future of Higher Education* 2003)

- Social inclusion and economic disadvantage (Government policy)
- Skills development for the workforce a government imperative (National Skills Task Force, *The Skills Strategy* White Paper and sector skills councils)
- Response to local, sector and regional economic need (Individual mission of the HEIs, Learning and Skills Council, and HEFCE strategy)
- Foundation degree recruitment (HEIs)
- Around 1.3 million people in work with level 3-type qualifications (City and Guilds)
- Work-based learning as a credible progression route into higher education (HEFCE, access and widening participation, Partnerships for Progression, and Aim Higher)
- Government target for 28 per cent of young people to enter MA programmes by 2004 Vocational routes from the age of 14 years (*14–19 Years* White Paper)
- The introduction of fees (Government policy)

Public funding for higher education in England is increasingly reflecting these drivers as described in the HEFCE strategy 2003:

Universities and colleges need to gauge their contribution to meeting regional and national needs in relation to the whole higher education sector ... the central message of the plan was that individual universities and colleges have to recognise that they cannot all meet the full range of customer and stakeholder needs to the necessary standards of excellence.

In particular, it suggests that there has to be a significant change in the nature of provision:

One of the greatest changes identified in the plan is to the traditional concept of higher education. Lifelong learning – the continued acquisition of knowledge and skills from cradle to grave – is turning education from a single life episode to a long-running series. This will require new types of courses and methods of delivery in order to provide education and top-up skills and knowledge where and when they are needed.

The Department for Education and Skills in the White Paper *The Future of Higher Education*, unequivocally sets out a strongly differentiated higher education sector with increasing emphasis on vocational education and training. This can be illustrated by the following extract from the 'Expanding Higher Education to Meet our Needs' chapter:

Increased participation in higher education towards 50% of those aged 18–30 by the end of the decade remains in place

Links between further and higher education will be strengthened to give students a clear progression pathway.

Financial incentives are to be made available for students entering foundation degrees.

Expansion is to be generated through two-year work-focused foundation degrees.

Support for the development of work-based degrees is to be provided by streamlining the funding regimes to make collaboration easier.

More support will be made available for students taking part-time degrees and the development of flexible '2+' arrangements, credit transfer and E-learning.

In addition, the White Paper places increased emphasis on relationships with business. This is aptly described in the chapter, 'Higher Education and Business – exchanging and developing knowledge and skills', and the following points provide an insight into the direction the Department is encouraging higher education institutions to take:

- Strong partnerships between higher education institutions in each region and the regional development agencies and other bodies charged with promoting economic development
- The setting up of a network of twenty knowledge exchanges to promote knowledge and technology transfer including skills development within local communities of practice

- Driving forward foundation degrees to make them the main work-focused higher education qualification, which will include HNC and HND within the foundation degree framework
- Stronger alliances facilitated by sector skills councils, between business and the relevant departments in higher education institutions to develop and market courses and involve employers and the delivery of learning
- The improvement of vocational skills for graduates, particularly the integration of skills and attributes which employers need, such as communication enterprise and working with others (key skills)
- Media studies, as a discipline, cannot ignore this and is challenged to respond through its education, training and research role as the major higher education entry to work and continuous professional development provider.

What is required to do this?

There are significant hurdles to overcome, in order to enable the discipline to respond to this changing environment. It cannot achieve this on its own, as it is essential for success that higher education institutions and national agencies recognize that structures, procedures and regulations need to be adjusted to facilitate a genuine response at the local level to workforce development, progression and widening access. The key issues that need to be addressed are:

- Flexible and diverse entry routes to level 4 (QCA) or level C (QAA)
- Recognition of the existing work-based qualifications and frameworks such as NVQ and modern apprenticeships
- Accumulating and crediting experience and learning, locally, regionally and nationally
- Understanding the needs of employers and constraints on employees
- Flexible response to needs and the learning of transferable skills
- Use of national occupational standards as a curriculum tool
- Work experience opportunities

A strengthening of sector body, employer and further and higher education collaboration to deliver effective, cohesive and transitional learner-centred routes to higher level qualifications is an inevitable consequence of this approach and requires the discipline to establish an equitable partnership in this case with Skillset. However, this should not be an exclusive relationship when it comes to employer engagement.

None of these policy goals can be achieved without compatibility and mutual recognition between the QCA and QAA frameworks including audit regimes not least to recognize prior learning and experience. This could potentially lead for the first time to the further and higher education national credit framework.

Central to success, as mentioned earlier, is the greater use and recognition of a common curriculum language, national occupational standards and QCA key skills for vocational and work-based routes into higher education.

Connectivity and responsiveness from what to where?

In practical terms, what does this mean for the programme leader or head of department in an individual higher education institution? First, it requires in those involved in recruitment, admissions and curriculum development to recognize the range of qualifications and routes that have been established. These can include:

- NVQ, level 3
- Advanced Modern Apprenticeships
- Vocational A level
- Other related vocational qualifications at level 3, (e.g. BTEC Nationals, City and Guilds and specialist awarding bodies)
- Vendor qualifications

The Tomlinson and Schwarz reviews of national examinations and admissions into higher education for 14 to 19-year-olds has the potential to add to the current chaos by the introduction of a national baccalaureate examination and differentiated institutional entry to higher education.

Even assuming that these reviews simplify the progression to higher education, there will be the need to match entry with the increasing spectrum of higher education qualifications.

These are as follows:

- Foundation degree
- HNC/HND
- HPC/HPD
- Hons. degree, certificate level
- NVQ level 4
- Professional qualifications, e.g. Institute of Linguists

Barriers to meeting the needs of the workforce

There is evidence to suggest that individual learners and employers do not understand the HE product offering and benefits. This should not be surprising as the focus of attention for higher education has to a large extent been on the school and school leaver.

This, coupled with perceived worries over the quality of the NVQ and modern apprenticeship routes, has led to a lack of confidence by higher education in particular in the these awards (as explained in a paper by Swales and Roodhouse published in the *Journal for Vocational Education and Training*, 55: 1 (2003)):

Consistent with Matlay (2000) we found that some of the ‘bad press’ about NVQs has done lasting damage. Renewed marketing initiatives need to target a more positive image with new messages. Further use of old messages about real-world competence and employer-led initiatives will not be effective. The living and working context has changed considerably since NVQs were introduced and the climate now is for high-quality qualifications, lifelong learning and access to higher education. Higher NVQs have a role to play so long as branding and design issues are resolved.

There is also a low level of understanding and information on the spectrum of level 3 qualifications available to HE admission tutors. This is a serious issue, and one that has been recognized as needing attention if government strategic objectives are to be met. It cannot be

seen in isolation and a consequence of this poor understanding is a lack of smooth transitional progression from work-based learning to higher education.

The poor articulation of part-time routes traditionally militates against those in work who wish to engage in learning.

No clearly defined national credit system which supports transferability underlines the failure by the further and higher education sector to respond to changing patterns of work, and the personal lives of employees.

The under-utilization of APEL is a symptom of the lack of understanding of the individuality of employees in the workforce, and in particular the range and depth of learning and expertise acquired.

A partial UCAS points system makes it increasingly difficult for an individual following a vocational route on a part-time basis to gain entry to higher education.

The lack of staff development compounds levels of ignorance in higher education and may indicate the lack of interest by individual higher education institutions.

The costs of learning and time commitment by the employer and the individual are substantial and often severely underestimated.

Overcoming the barriers

The barriers could be overcome by undertaking the following actions at institutional level and by regional and national agencies:

- Training and accreditation of admission tutors and services
- Accreditation of Advanced Modern Apprenticeship and NVQ routes as entry to HE.
- Integrated provision from FE and private training providers to HE with a common credit and APEL system
- Accelerated learning routes linked to at least a regional APEL system

- UCAS to include a wider range of vocational qualifications at level 3 in respect of the tariff system
- Financial incentives to employers and employees
- Flexible forms of delivery
- Overhaul of part-time provision
- Clear part-time work-based progression route to graduate apprenticeships

The ultimate mechanism for overcoming the barriers to developing the media workforce must be an integrated national qualification system. It will be impossible to generate a national credit accumulation and transfer scheme as well as encourage the greater use of accreditation of prior learning and experience unless there is a coherent national qualification framework that has currency throughout the United Kingdom. This approach would also enable progression routes to be developed in an explicit manner from further to higher education and would significantly enable all those involved to be aware of the spectrum of approved qualifications. A national framework may be represented in the following diagram.

Figure 1. A national framework

Qualification	General		Vocationally related	Occupational
7 D (doctorate) level			Doctorates	Level 5 NVQ
6 M (masters) level			Master degree, postgraduate certificates and postgraduate diplomas, graduate apprenticeships Key skills	Level 5 NVQ
5 H (honours) level			Bachelor's degrees with honours, graduate certificates and graduate diplomas Key skills	Level 5 NVQ
4 I (intermediate) level			Foundation degrees, ordinary (bachelor's) degrees, diplomas of higher education and other higher diplomas Key skills	Level 4 NVQ
4 C (certificate) level			Certificates of higher education Key skills	
3 advanced level	A and AS levels, key skills	Vocational A level advanced modern apprenticeships	Foundation GNVQ	Level 3 NVQ
2 intermediate level	GCSE grade A*–C	(advanced GNVQ) Modern apprenticeships, including key skills		Level 2 NVQ
1 foundation level	GCSE grade D–G	Key skills		Level 1 NVQ
Entry level		Certificate of educational achievement		

Source: Professor Simon Roodhouse, 2003

It also requires a consistent approach to raising awareness and the value perceptions of NVQS, NOS and modern apprenticeships among HEIs; the development of an accreditation system for modern apprenticeship frameworks as an entry award for higher education particularly foundation degrees; and accreditation of a part-time *credit/work-based route* linking modern apprenticeships, foundation degrees and graduate apprenticeships into continuous professional development.

A role for UVAC and AMPE

UVAC and AMPE can work together for their mutual benefit to establish a network which responds to this agenda and has the potential benefits of:

- Local and national action
- Joint accreditation of programmes including foundation degrees, graduate apprenticeships, and professional development
- Joint representation on work-based education and training matters
- Sharing of expertise
- Access to events

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Glossary of acronyms

AMPE: Association of Media Practitioners in Education

APEL: accreditation of prior experience and learning

DfEE: Department for Education and Employment

DfES: Department for Education and Skills

FE: further education

HEFCE: Higher Education Funding Council for England

HE: higher education

HEI: higher education institute

HNC: the higher national certificate offered by Edexcel

HND: the higher national diploma offered by Edexcel

HPC: the higher professional certificate offered by City and Guilds

HPD: the higher professional diploma offered by City and Guilds

NOS: National occupational standards

NVQ: National vocational qualification

QAA: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

QCA: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

RDA: regional development agencies

SSC: sector skills councils

UCAS: University Central Admissions Service

UVAC: University Vocational Awards Council