

Widening Participation in the Workplace:

A New Agenda for Further and Higher Education

Proceedings of the
University Vocational Awards Council
Annual Conference
at St William's College, York, 2002

Edited by Professor Simon Roodhouse and David Hemsworth

UNIVERSITY VOCATIONAL AWARDS COUNCIL

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Contents

Introduction	5
Keynote address: Widening participation and the distributed university Professor Roger Waterhouse, Vice Chancellor, University of Derby	6
Workable higher education/business consortia – the higher education perspective Val Butcher, LTSN Generic Centre	11
Higher-level NVQs: stakeholder perceptions of catalysts and barriers Dr Stephen Swailes, University College Northampton, and Professor Simon Roodhouse, Chief Operating Officer, UVAC	13
Research on higher education attitudes to N/SVQs, National Occupational Standards (NOS) and qualifications/frameworks based on the NOS – issues that are external to higher education Dr Pauline Peregrine, University of Glamorgan Business School	17
Foundation Degrees and managing consortia Professor Robin Smith, Pro Vice Chancellor, Anglia Polytechnic University	23
Implementing graduate apprenticeships at the University of Teesside – a case study Professor Graham Henderson, Deputy Vice Chancellor, University of Teesside	26
Other topics covered during the proceedings	29
Issues raised in discussion groups	31

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Introduction

The third University Vocational Awards Council conference was supported by Edexcel, City and Guilds, LCCIEB and learndirect. The conference set out to identify strategies and actions for widening participation in higher education and improving progression from further education to HE through work-based learning as a means of realising the 50 per cent participation target for higher education by 2010. This follows on from the previous conference which considered the new vocational initiatives such as Foundation Degrees and Graduate Apprenticeships.

Little attention has been given to widening participation in higher education through the workplace and this conference focused attention on financial, strategic, operational and structural issues for those working in FE, HE and Sector Skills Councils in delivering this agenda. It is welcoming to see that initiatives are underway with the LTSN Generic Centre and the Employability Support Group, financially backed by HEFCE, taking the employability agenda forward. There is, however, some way to go yet in establishing a coherent work-based route to and through higher education linking Modern Apprenticeships, Foundation Degrees and Graduate Apprenticeships, and using National Occupational Standards.

The key issues to emerge were:

- Universities are not just centres of learning and research but also provide assessment. They are assessment centres capable of responding to and facilitating new forms of learning
- The importance of information technology in delivering learning in the workplace
- There is an imperative for both sides of the partnership (employers and academics) to understand each other's language and appreciate each other's pressures and timescales, which are often very different
- The national qualification system has not been taken up at the higher levels due to bad press, lack of promotion and resources, although it is proving to be a success in areas where there are few professional qualifications
- The biggest barrier to the take-up of National Occupational Standards and NVQs in higher education is funding and a lack of knowledge of the potential of these standards and qualifications in extending the work of HEIs in the workplace
- There are successful and workable models of practice in HEIs which need to be shared as good practice
- Partnerships are key and we need to understand how these work, particularly with employers, if the needs of those in work are to be realised by higher education working with further education.

These issues are explored from an individual perspective in the following selected papers presented at the conference and in the summary of other issues raised by speakers and delegates during the proceedings.

Finally we would like to dedicate these proceedings to Mike Daniel who, until his untimely death, was an active and supportive member of the Board of Directors.

Professor Simon Roodhouse
Chief Operating Officer
July 2003

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Keynote Address:

Widening Participation and the Distributed University

Professor Roger Waterhouse, Vice Chancellor, University of Derby

The thesis

My central thesis is that we cannot widen participation in post-school education to the extent that is socially and economically necessary without engagement with the workplace and with the home. That is because not only the nature but the function of learning has changed irreversibly. The major underlying cause has been technological development. The changes which this has wrought have opened up a gap between the way in which we think of pedagogic process, and the reality of it. When it comes to our institutions, the gap between current configurations and future need is even greater. We need to re-conceptualise the learning process in the light of the technological revolution we are living through and reformat our institutions accordingly. This reformatting must result in a distributed university, of which the workplace is a crucial part. Learning in the workplace must no longer be a bolt-on or optional extra. It must be an integral part of the main stream.

Learning

Learning occurs throughout life. Education does not – but should it? From the moment we are born we are learning; a process that continues until we die. Human beings, like other higher animals, learn whether or not they are deliberately taught. We can observe the process in others by the way in which they improve their performance, become more successful in achieving their goals. We can experience it in ourselves as we get better at doing things, as we understand more, and as we communicate more successfully with others. We learn from others by observation, by imitation, by communication. The others may not intend to participate in our learning process. They may happily facilitate it or deliberately seek to guide it, as teachers.

So we are all, inevitably, learners. Learners do not need teachers, but it helps. In humans the learning process is a continuous virtuous spiral between activity and thought, between practice and theory. A spiral rather than a circle, because the test of learning is improvement. Without improvement learning has not taken place. Action without reflection is dumb; reflection without action is sterile.

Education

Education is about doing things to people – whether they like it or not, whether they volunteer or are compelled. It implies a power relationship – those who know, and those who don't: those who do the educating, and those to whom it is done. Learning can take place without teaching. It is equally true that teaching can take place without learning – as we all know from our schooldays.

Education is a social process. Wherever it occurs around the world, it is children who are its first targets. Whether it is about survival in the bush, or coping with the urban jungle, children need to learn and adults have a responsibility to teach them. Most learning and most teaching are processes which occur outside formal institutions and are not thought of as education. Where they are formalised this usually occurs in groups, and socialisation is critically part of what it tries to achieve. Educational systems around the world socialise children into particular societies, give them cultural identities, histories, social and moral standards. Education the world over is about inducting children into a given society. It reinforces the past, sometimes opens up the future, achieves social control and reinforces shared values. It is crucially about initiation into the status quo.

Technical education

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 as soon as we are born. Technical education as a specific social institution began when techniques had reached a certain level of complication and sophistication. In Europe this gave birth 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 the mediaeval guild are still with us.

Vocational universities

A vocation is a calling, and the highest vocation, certainly in Europe, is to the priesthood. We should never forget that the European universities were invented to deliver vocational education in the strictest of senses. They were set up by the Church to train clerks, ie. clerics. All the great civilisations of the old world had similar institutions with an identical purpose.

The classic model of the late mediaeval university was that of Paris. Like other European universities the Sorbonne had four faculties. The lower faculty was the faculty of Arts, generally training young men in the skills of the clerk (church employee). The three higher faculties were those of theology, medicine and laws. The whole purpose was vocational, with the degree as a licence to practise and the doctorate as a licence to teach.

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 to the faculty of medicine. If you needed a surgeon, 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.

Technical colleges

In 1792 the Legislative Assembly of the French Revolution abolished the Sorbonne. Three years later the Convention established the Hautes Ecoles dedicated to practical and technical learning – astronomy, geometry, mechanics, applied arts, natural history, medicine, veterinary science and rural economy. This was more than a symbolic gesture. During the 17th and 18th centuries there was an explosion in technical knowledge which had taken place almost entirely outside the universities. The investigation, experimentation and learning had 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 very 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. 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 we saw the colleges of mines, engineering, commerce etc being established. Later we had the development of technical schools and colleges, specialised professional schools for teachers, nurses, artists, designers etc, all of which went to make up the heritage of the English polytechnics. None of these had degree-awarding powers, though various professional diplomas were invented. 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.

Residual concepts of education

This history of higher education is still embedded in our present day concepts. 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. They are stopping us going forward.

1992

1992 was a critical turning point in the history of higher education in the UK, with the end of the binary divide between universities and polytechnics. Furthermore it officially abolished the difference in status between the institutions of theoretical learning and those which had championed the practical and the technical. It gave to the latter the identical degree-awarding powers of the former. And it appeared to level the playing field in terms of future funding.

As with many great historical events its perpetrators barely realised the significance of what they were doing, and the populace at large did not perceive any fundamental change in the landscape. In terms of public perceptions, it is easy to read the past 10 years of the educational press (or the national press on matters educational) as a prolonged rearguard action attempting to deny the reality of 1992. Indeed one could argue that the rearguard was given institutional form and armaments in the form of QAA. Nor can that other institution of 1992, HEFCE, provide any convincing demonstration that it set out to embrace the future rather than the past.

The other binary divide

However profound the institutional shift which took place in 1992, it left one huge piece of unfinished business. It disregarded the institutions where the bulk of adult learning takes place, and with which a major part of the population engages – the so-called Further Education sector. There were good practical and political reasons why the then government should not have taken it on, but these were neither fundamental nor long term. The subsequent decision by the Labour government to abolish the FEFC and the TECs, and to set up instead the centralising Learning and Skills Council, suffered from the same failure of imagination.

The fundamental problem has not been addressed, and the short-term fix has not been achieved.

Consider these very current topics which will be discussed at this conference:

- Accreditation of workplace learning
- National standards
- Knowledge transfer
- Quality assurance systems
- Centres of Excellence
- Higher skills
- Vocational awards
- The National Health Service University
- Foundation degrees
- Graduate apprenticeships
- National Credit Accumulation and Transfer system.

None of them is specific to further or to higher education. Some of them represent specific government initiatives which have been steered largely in the further or the higher education direction. But that is only because the institutional divide exists and there are at national level no governmental institutions which encompass the full spread of learner needs. Other than the DfES, not noted for its radical forward thinking, no institution has any responsibility for taking an overview. Again we are the victims of our institutional history.

There is no rationale in terms of the needs of learners, the needs of society or the needs of the economy for the continuation of further and higher education in separate silos. The continuation of those silos hinders making progress on almost all of the above list of issues. Universities like Derby and Leeds Metropolitan, which had the foresight to begin the construction of an integrated system of lifelong learning, know to their daily cost that many of the benefits can only be delivered with a genuine deconstruction of the remaining binary line.

The accreditation of learning

New technology vastly extends the possibilities for both formal and informal learning. So why do we need institutions of education? Even if teaching institutions transformed themselves into structures for the enablement of learning, there would still be a crucial function left for them to perform – the accreditation of learning. Without accreditation there is no public recognition and no standards. There need to be institutions of assessment both for society and for the individual.

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 and are awarding bodies. It is this social certification of successful learning that individuals, employers and ultimately society will pay for. The debate about standards, as has been acutely illustrated in the recent A level fiasco, is all about public confidence in the accreditation process. And that is why the most damaging attack which can be made on the post-'92 universities is that they are sub-standard. Accreditation of workplace learning is likely to be seen as an Achilles heel by the conservatives of '92, backed by the Institute of Directors.

New technology

It is a truism to say that information and communications technology have transformed the ways in which we live, work, interact and enjoy ourselves. Economically we know that we have to be a knowledge-based, service-led economy, that manual and unskilled jobs disappear on a daily basis and that the sustainable newly created ones are dependent on ever-higher levels of knowledge and skills.

Less appreciated is the way in which the technology is profoundly changing the way students learn. It will profoundly change the way we teach, though much of this development is yet to come. Aspects of the learning process, such as powerful research tools, sophisticated analytical software and access to unprecedented amounts of information, are obvious examples. The way in which the students' learning process is changing is less obvious.

With the advent of computer packages designed to enable learning rather than simply transcribe teaching, we are beginning to appreciate the computer's ability to accommodate individual variation in learning styles and ways of understanding. There is also the issue of instantaneous assessment as a formative part of the learning process. Feedback can be immediate, hugely increasing the efficiency of the learning process.

Service industry

Universities need 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, we have the customer and facilitator of learning. In place of the campus, the distributed system which technology enables institutions to extend into the workplace.

Technology has driven huge change in work, society and leisure activity. It is now impossible for children emerging from school to have attained adequate knowledge to see them through the rest of their lives. We need to abandon the model of education as initiation and adopt one which sees it as a continual process. Education, like learning, should continue throughout life.

Service standards

The new technology enables education to improve levels of service by providing constant support for learning. However, the term 'e-learning' has come to be used for the delivery of learning support by electronic means. In the UK context this is still largely seen as accessing new learners and new markets. This obscures the fact that the technology is capable of impacting just as forcibly on traditional learners and old markets. E-learning cannot remain a bolt-on – it is rapidly becoming mainstream.

The service standards required challenge fundamentally the way we organise our universities. Just as it has long been the case that an institution which provided good service to its part-time students also treated its full-time students well, so the university which organises itself to deliver high-quality service standards to remote learners will deliver a far better quality service to its on-campus activities.

The impact of technology on service quality – example

The University of Derby has about 4,500 students in Israel. It delivers learning support by means of a system called interactive distance learning, whereby a teacher sits in a studio in Derby and gives a presentation which is beamed by satellite to six different locations in Israel. In each location there is a study group led by a learning facilitator. The technology enables the learner in Israel to put questions or comments to the teacher in Derby and for everyone in the network to listen in and watch. The first day of the working week in Israel is Sunday, when classes begin at 8.00am. There is a two-hour time difference between Israel and the UK. The university therefore starts its weekly teaching programme in Israel at 6.00am on a Sunday morning UK time.

Constraints on change

If we mainstream the use of the new technology and drive through the delivery of a high-quality service to ever more discerning customers, then our institutions will be radically transformed. This will not happen quickly for three reasons. The first is institutional inertia and the lack of real commercial pressure. Second is because the commanding heights of political power are still occupied by those tainted with the conservatism of '92. The third is something peculiarly British – the combination of acute status consciousness and class bias which gives to Oxford and Cambridge, uniquely in the world, the absolute pre-eminence in the national system. The universities which by innovation delivers a world-class service standard of learning support to their customers will without doubt be branded as low class, grubby, and not up to standard. Those embarked on this entrepreneurial track must constantly calculate the reputational risks.

But it must be done because there is no other way of delivering that widening participation agenda. Increased funding alone, whether through higher fees or extra government funding, is not enough. Government and the universities must embrace the idea of the distributed university. That means:

- starting with that virtuous spiral of thought and action which underlies the learning process
- hold firm to the belief that an institution's function is the facilitation of learning – practical, technical as well as theoretical
- embracing the power the new technology gives both to learners and to institutions as facilitators
- driving forward electronically-based interactive assessment as a powerful formative tool in the learning process and reformatting institutions accordingly
- systematically undermining the further and higher education divide
- embedding standards of constantly improving customer service and asserting the integrity of those standards
- remember that the power of accreditation is a unique selling point.

Workable Higher Education/Business Consortia – The Higher Education Perspective

Val Butcher, LTSN Generic Centre

Despite many exemplary examples of effective working relationships between further and higher education and the world of work, particularly over the past ten years – and particularly in educational institutions in membership of UVAC – we somehow seem to be incapable of learning from experience. Succeeding generations of employers are still marooned in tedious development project ‘Steering Committees’ whose proceedings take place in academic jargon. Frustrated academics are still struggling to secure placements and projects with the very companies who are lambasting the quality of their graduates’ work-readiness.

The employability agenda, which looms large in the government’s blueprint for further and higher education (closely linked to the widening participation agenda), offers the possibility of a dreary vision of years of ‘more of the same’ with lip-service paid to subsidise partnerships and bad-tempered diatribes on both sides in the press. But perhaps it also gives an opportunity to make real working relationships based on greater understanding of the different agendas, pressures, timescales and resources of educational institutions and companies.

So where does the problem lie? In over 30 years of working at the interface between education and the world of work, I have encountered a constantly recurring myth: academics seem to believe that all employers have loads of money, while employers appear to think that all academics have loads of time! This is a stereotype of what are often good and productive experiences of partnership in the face of these difficulties, but there are not enough examples of these to help us face the challenges which can be identified equally by companies and education. These challenges are surprisingly similar for both sides of the partnership:

- **Skills shortages and skills gaps:** The National Skills Task Force, DTI Competitiveness White Papers and other reports have emphasised that the UK has a skills gap at supervisory/advanced technician level, in comparison with our international competitors. In further and higher education, there is increasing concern about the degree of preparedness of entrants through courses at all levels and continuing complaints from employers that the output of full-time further and higher education is not equipped with the skills they seek.
- **The changing nature of the labour market:** The labour market and the workplace have been changing with increasing rapidity over the last 20 years. Whilst this is accepted as axiomatic, there has still been insufficient review of education and training provision to support these changes, particularly in those occupational areas regulated by professional bodies.
- **Widening participation:** The government has set a target that 50 per cent of young people up to the age of 30 should have some experience of higher education by the year 2010. In 2001, this was around 41 per cent. What are the implications for further and higher education in meeting this target? What are the implications for employer recruitment?
- **Role of further and higher education:** This has been almost constantly under review for the past ten years, and increasing accountability is being asked from a range of stakeholders – students and their families, employers, government agencies and policy makers. Increased output is required without related increasing resources; workplace skills are increasingly being sought through non-vocational courses, and in vocational courses the patterns of student choice and employer needs require a fast and flexible response from education which there may not be the resources to implement.

Effective partnerships and ways of working together are the only way forward. Employers can scarcely complain of the work preparedness of campus-based students if they do not fulfil their role in providing aspects of this work preparedness: not only work placements, but participating work shadowing schemes, offering to mentor

individuals and groups of learners, offering projects which can be undertaken by the application of certain academic disciplines, and providing real world data for simulations and case studies.

An increasing number of workplace learners are likely to be requiring a firm bridge between their employment and the recognition and development of their learning and skills. Contrary to some perceptions, the demand for sub-degree/advanced vocational higher education has been hardly falling over the years to 2001/2. A decline in some subjects (Engineering/Technology and Business) has been counterbalanced by growth in others (for example, IT and Art & Design).

For employees to feel that courses which will validate and progress their skills are relevant, this needs to be demonstrable by employer participation in those courses in developing and sometimes delivering the curriculum, and in some aspects of assessment. Workplace learners also need to perceive clear routes for progression and see alternative routes within their workplace to those offered by further and higher courses. Most importantly, education institutions and their staff need to take account of workplace pressures in the way the curriculum is delivered and students supported. All this takes time and money.

Despite this, there is an imperative for both sides of the partnership to make things work. Understanding each other's language and trying to be as jargon-free as possible when producing information and documentation for each other; appreciating each other's pressures and timescales, which are often very different in companies to those of educational institutions. There also needs to be respect for each other's financial constraints. Companies need to be clearly informed about what they are buying, and equally to have understanding of the costs to education of mounting courses.

Above all, further and higher education institutions and companies and public sector organisations need to take risks together – risks in taking on new learners, developing new courses and exploring new ways of supporting learning.

Higher-Level NVQs: Stakeholder Perceptions of Catalysts and Barriers

**Dr Stephen Swailes, University College Northampton, and
Professor Simon Roodhouse, Chief Operating Officer, UVAC**

Market overview

Take-up across nearly 800 NVQ titles has been uneven. In the area 'Providing Business Services' prior to October 2000, about half of the 165 available titles had seen under 100 awards each and of these some had attracted no awards. At levels 4 and 5, 'Providing Business Services' is comfortably the most popular area and almost all the awards at level 5 have been in subjects related to Management.

Of the 3.5 million NVQs awarded by September 2001, 95.1 per cent were at levels 1 to 3 and well over half of these were at level 2. Of the remainder, about 110,000 awards had been achieved at level 4 and 8,200 at level 5.

Awards at level 4 have increased steadily to 14,395 in 2001 and awards at level 5 have been steady at around 1,000 each year. The most popular higher NVQs are in Accounting and Management where success is due to linkage of accounting NVQs with the qualifying route for the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT) and management NVQs linked to the Institute of Management's professional entry route and the wide spread of management qualifications.

Further education and tertiary colleges provide about half of NVQ4 awards and private training providers about a quarter. Employers deliver 11 per cent and two per cent come through the university sector. FE and tertiary colleges provide 36 per cent of NVQ5 awards, private providers 39 per cent, employers 16 per cent and higher education institutions eight per cent. (Source: QCA, coverage 1999/00 academic year.) For levels 4 and 5 combined, the higher education sector provided only 2.5 per cent of all awards.

Among the most popular awards are Accounting with 5,744 awards in 2000, with Management level 4 at around 3,200 and there is a noticeable upward trend in level 5. Other titles demonstrating growth are Care, Guidance, Occupational Health and Safety Practice, Building Site Management, Procurement, Waste Management and Treatment and Community Justice. Further growth can be expected in areas regulated by public authorities such as social services.

There is considerable variation in adoption rates by size of firm: less than one per cent in micro businesses, 3.4 per cent in small businesses (11-49 employees), 15.2 per cent in medium-sized businesses (50-250 employees) and 25.8 per cent in businesses with over 250 employees (Matlay, 1999, 2000).

Summary of criticisms

The standards

The Management standards illustrate the criticisms surrounding standards of occupational competence. They portray management as generalisable and value-free and thus ignore the contingent nature of management and the political nature of organisations (Grugulis, 2000; Loan-Clarke, 1996). The standards foster a poor learning experience (Ecclestone, 1997, p.77) and this can be linked to the low completion rates often observed (Hillier, 1997). Style, content and format are also seen as discouraging (Beaumont, 1995, p.13; Employment Department, 1995). Calls for simplification using plain English have been overlooked and stipulations governing assessment and concern about long completion times have impeded the design of tailored development programmes (Brown, 1999).

Reputation

The ongoing negative and adverse publicity about NVQs has damaged their reputation (Matlay, 2000). Employers were confused by the framework and with other aspects of NVQ provision, so much so that an extensive review of operations was completed (Beaumont, 1995). Fuller (1994) suggested that NVQs were weak on the two dimensions of 'use' value (relevance to actual work and tasks) and 'exchange' value (enabling holders to get a better job for instance).

The learning experience

Portfolio construction is not an intuitive process and students can struggle to understand how to relate evidence to standards (Hillier, 1999; Grugulis, 1997a, 1997b). Higher NVQs have a poor reputation for developing skills and knowledge (Fuller, 1994; Hillier, 1999; Holman and Hall, 1996).

It is important to note that studies of the learning experience struggle to separate problems directly linked to the standards and poor learning/teaching methods used by providers possibly caused by poor programme design or tutors with little commitment to NVQs.

Overall completion rates are a problem as national data for NVQs in Management show that completions were running at about 30 per cent of registrations (Swales and Brown, 1999). Low completion rates need to be offset, however, by the lifelong learning ethos that goes with NVQs.

Costs and returns

The costs of NVQs differ widely (Employment Department, 1995). Differences occur in assessment time and the costs of providing the supporting infrastructure and the benefits of NVQ programmes to employers are very hard to quantify. Hyland and Matlay (1998, p.407) reported that the costs of work-based NVQs are relatively high and they seem to yield lower returns to training compared to other qualifications (Dearden et al, 2000).

Benefits of higher NVQs

Despite the negative literature about NVQs there is a more positive aspect. There was no difference in the performance of students on postgraduate management programmes regardless of their entry qualification (Taylor, 1996). NVQ holders report growth in personal confidence (Hillier, 1999; Swales, 1997). Winterton and Winterton (1997) found that management development based on the MCI's standards can lead to improved individual and organisational performance. Occupational standards help to raise the skills of a workforce and help improve systems and procedures in organisations such as recruitment and selection or information management (Hillier, 1999).

The Research Study

Information was collected from over 80 organisations in early 2002. Telephone interviews explored perceptions of barriers held by a range of stakeholders. The interviews were semi-structured and built around key themes rather than lists of closed questions. The sample included 17 universities, 12 awarding bodies and National Training Organisations (NTO), 12 Small Business Services (SBSs), 12 Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs), ten private and ten public sector employers, and ten students that had completed a full NVQ at level 4 or 5. The sample represented England, Wales and Northern Ireland. NTOs were selected on the basis that they had developed higher NVQs in their field. For consistency, the SBSs were mostly located in the same region as served by the LSC. They were geographically dispersed and covered rural, urban and mixed economies. Ten students were contacted of which six had completed a level 5 and four had completed a level 4.

Personal interviews were held with managers in a mix of small, large, public and private organisations. Eight case studies were produced to show the stance of these organisations towards NVQs and were returned to the originators for comments and corrections before being finalised.

Key Results

A summary of the key stakeholder perceptions is given below.

Learning and Skills Councils

Employers and individuals were thought to see NVQs as lower-level qualifications. Completion times were seen as a problem particularly in small firms. NVQs require a time-consuming support infrastructure relative to other qualifications at the same level. Professional bodies should be encouraged to integrate NVQs more with their entrance qualifications. NVQs also need to be more flexible to better fit individual jobs and ease the evidencing process.

Small Business Services (Business Links)

Small firms had low training budgets although completion times were regarded by some as a higher barrier than costs and financing. Short (non-NVQ) courses were preferred, being less expensive in terms of the time lost. Poor perceptions of NVQs stemmed from NVQs lacking flexibility and specificity. The portfolio process was isolating whereas short courses enable trainees to work with others with similar problems. Bad experiences with NVQ providers had coloured their views. NVQs were seen as surrounded by jargon.

Universities

After strong activity in the 1990s, the delivery of higher NVQs has diminished due to lack of demand. However, one university reported growth in an Advice and Guidance NVQ partly because there are no competing qualifications. Funding problems are partly linked to demand falls as, without funding, programmes are expensive and corporate clients can easily find cheaper providers. The trend among organisations to internalise NVQ frameworks in competence development strategies has also cut demand for full qualifications.

Relations with awarding bodies were generally good although bureaucracy and poor learning experiences were noted. Those universities involved in NVQs felt that they were still influenced by 'snobbery' towards the competence movement. Those not providing NVQs felt that the further education sector was the right place for them.

Awarding bodies

The term 'NVQ' was again associated with low-level qualifications and academic qualifications were deemed to give more breadth and provide better value to students and employers. They were not valued highly by employers and greater parity of vocational and academic qualifications is needed.

Funding was a fundamental barrier along with the costs of higher NVQs to employers. Building a portfolio around normal work activities is harder than taught qualifications built around regular time slots. The standard approach to assessment used at lower levels does not fit as comfortably at higher-level NVQs. Two awarding bodies reported shortages of specific higher NVQ titles. Accountancy and Care Services are examples but such awards could be partially redundant with existing qualifications. Some re-branding of high-level awards together with increased promotion and funding by government were suggested to improve take-up and perceptions. Standards were criticised for being rigid, complex and jargon-filled. While National Occupational Standards are designed to be generic they were thought to fit individual jobs poorly. There are too many core units and not enough options.

Public sector employers

The stigma attached to NVQs from bad press persists. They struggle to be recognised as professional qualifications and portfolio production is onerous and felt by some to be an administrative nightmare. A mismatch between occupational standards and individual jobs creates barriers since it is difficult to evidence some units. Without external funding costs are prohibitive. In one government department most staff were either too well qualified on entry to be interested in NVQs or too junior to do higher NVQs. High staff turnover within the department also depressed demand.

Private sector employers

Senior managers lacked an understanding of NVQs and how they work and some thought they were not rigorous enough for senior managers. Conversely, in two small firms the attitudes to NVQs were positive

but there was no history of higher NVQ usage nor were there any plans to use them. NVQs were thought to be time consuming and standards were thought to have inadequate fit with typical jobs making evidencing some units difficult. Tailored in-house training was preferred. The perceived value of NVQs needs to be raised and more flexibility through more optional units was recommended. In the private sector, NVQs are seldom a requirement to get a job and this helps create a circle of depressed demand.

Successful NVQ candidates

Eight people said that a management NVQ had helped them, either by gaining the theory underpinning practice or by giving a benchmark for their performance. NVQs highlighted various management skills that students had not previously considered or used and which could be applied in their work. Only two students said the NVQ had not helped in their job. They felt that they carried no recognition despite the work undertaken to gain them. Nine students said the NVQ was developmental and had increased their confidence and overall awareness of other elements of management and personal skills. Portfolio compilation was a problem, in particular the volume of evidence needed. Some students felt the standards were unclear.

The most common barrier was of NVQs having less recognition than degrees. Standards need to be clearer about the evidence that is needed and NVQs need to be more flexible about evidence.

Financial issues

Funding mechanisms for NVQs

This is a complex area but in sum, higher education institutions do not get funding for NVQs. Some funding occurs in further education colleges. Some universities have overcome the funding barrier by linking higher NVQs to academic awards for which funding is claimed.

Discussion and conclusions

The following conclusions are based upon a wider analysis contained in the full report.

Adoption trends

Despite the fall in NVQ activity in universities, the overall level of higher NVQ take-up is substantial at around 15,000 full certificates a year. Popular areas include Accounting, Management-related subjects, Care and Waste Management. Level 5 NVQs seem to be struggling, however. Growth seems likely in areas not well-served by traditional qualifications.

Image and promotion

Higher NVQs have a role to play so long as branding and design issues are resolved. There is good support for them even though the overall scene is patchy. Some of the past publicity has caused long-lasting damage. Fresh initiatives need to target a more positive image with new messages. Old messages about real world competence and employer-led initiatives are not effective. The modern climate is for high-quality qualifications, lifelong learning and access to higher education.

Perceptions about the equivalence of NVQs to other qualifications need resolving. There was little belief that comparisons of NVQs with degrees are realistic or meaningful. There is some confusion about 'what NVQs are' which needs resolving.

The marketing of higher NVQs is relatively weak. Neither awarding bodies nor the university sector are promoting NVQs as much as comparable qualifications and this contributes to depressed take-up. Many NVQ success stories are found where ownership comes through professional bodies who promote them well. Separate identities for higher NVQs that reinforce parity with academic qualifications need to be considered along with radically new delivery mechanisms.

Research on Higher Education Attitudes to N/SVQs, National Occupational Standards (NOS) and Qualifications/Frameworks Based on the NOS – issues that are external to Higher Education

Dr Pauline Peregrine, University of Glamorgan Business School

This is a summary of research carried out by Arthur Morgan and Pauline Peregrine of the Glamorgan Business School, and by consultant Sandy Coleman for the National Training Organisations National Council, from November 2001 to January 2002.

Introduction

The team approached the research from why HE would or would not wish to offer N/SVQs or other NOS-based qualifications. It was secondary research, no new data being generated.

Why would HE want to offer N/SVQs or other NOS-based qualifications?

The answers arising initially included:

- To complement access and widening participation initiatives
- To allow vocationally-focused progression for those who have already achieved lower-level vocational qualifications
- To provide certification for work-based learning
- To access funding
- To contribute to the 'third mission' of HE, ie. consultancy and non-funding-related income generation
- To engage more effectively with some professional bodies
- To provide separate certification for key skills
- To provide staff development
- To respond to market forces and/or government pressure for national training targets.

Why would HE not want to offer N/SVQs or other NOS-based qualifications?

Initial findings included:

- To avoid the range of problems experienced in reconciling different assessment regimes across QCA and QAA
- To avoid such staff development as assessor/verifier awards
- To avoid the logistics of providing and supporting externally-validated awards
- Wider concerns related to the achievement of a notional national standard
- More specific concerns related to the reliability, content and consistency of NOS
- Governance issues, HEI autonomy and the right to award
- To avoid the resource implications of dealing, potentially, with over 100 separate awarding bodies
- To avoid negative market pressure and the public perception of the 'difference' between vocational and academic awards
- Insufficient time (12 years?) for higher-level awards to have gained credibility in the marketplace, relatively rapid changes to NOS (five years?) and regular changes in statutory requirements (five years?)
- The perception of N/SVQs being training-based with little assessment of knowledge.

Reviewing these questions in depth provided us with a wide range of issues to address:

- The future of higher-level N/SVQs over the next five to ten years
- Parity of esteem
- Marketplace perceptions and market intelligence
- Funding in HE for N/SVQs and NOS-based awards
- HEI admissions policies in relation to academic versus vocational credit
- Bureaucracy and the proliferation of audit by both QCA and QAA

- The potential for integration of procedures
- The potential for melding criterion-referenced and norm-referenced learning
- The apparent unpopularity of portfolio-based assessment
- The potential for the utilisation of NOS for both CPD and future curriculum development
- Reviewing the knowledge base of HEIs in this area
- Better provision of data relating to NOS and NOS-based qualifications in terms of the standards themselves, uptake, use in specific areas such as Graduate and Modern Apprenticeships by QCA and/or DfES
- The need for resourcing the training and development of HEI staff in this area.

Given the time available for the work and the overlap of issues, we decided to concentrate on eight areas:

1. Marketing and demand
2. 'Hybrid' qualifications
3. Assessment and completion
4. Key skills
5. Comparability/equivalence
6. Credit
7. Quality assurance and assessment requirements
8. The four nations.

The following sections summarise the key messages from each of these areas.

1. Marketing and demand: The funding of HE qualifications has tended to result in a supply-driven environment, although the current movement towards credit-related, output-driven funding could change this balance in the future. The new Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and the remaining National Training Organisations (NTOs) are identifying sector demands for a higher mix of vocational and academic content to provide the skills needed in employment at higher levels. Examples include the embedding of N/SVQs at level 4 in academic awards such as an MSc Management – Glass Technology, a Diploma in Probation Studies and an MSc in Engineering Management. In addition, the new statutory frameworks for the emerging Care Councils in the four nations include significant requirements for N/SVQs at level 4. Some higher-level N/SVQs are recognised as post-qualification awards, examples being Management and Learning & Development. However, in spite of the apparent demand identified by the NTOs/SSCs, individuals seem to prefer Master's degrees and other academic awards.

In addition, there is evidence that only a small number of HEIs give high credibility to vocational credit through the admissions process – academic credit normally taking priority. This will naturally result in a lower demand for vocationally-based qualifications at both pre-HE and pre-Master's level.

The apparent demand for N/SVQs in HE appears to be small and the funding streams are tortuous. The majority of awards can already be accessed through FE although, in Wales at least, there is now an issue about FE accessing funding for NVQs at levels 4 and 5.

Overall, there seems to be no clear picture of the demand for N/SVQs or other NOS-based awards in HE. As demand should advise possible supply, we would recommend that some market research should be carried out via the NTO/SSC network and elsewhere.

2. 'Hybrid' qualifications: There is a range of NOS-based awards which results in the award of a dual qualification – usually a Certificate or Diploma alongside a N/SVQ. This, in theory, is good practice as it is associated with innovative curriculum development using the NOS. However, it causes difficulties for HE, mainly because the life cycles of the academic and vocational components differ. One of the reasons for this is that the final versions of NOS are only made available to awarding bodies after approval by the Products and Standards Approvals Group (PSAG) of QCA. Following this approval, the N/SVQs become 'live' very quickly, whereas there is a time lag for the development of the parallel award. At the point of expiry of N/SVQs, the parallel NOS-based award is likely to remain current for some time. Nevertheless, the positive effects of such programmes (Eraut et al, 2001) are:

- that they reflect positive experiences of both academic and vocational approaches, and
- it is a more pragmatic approach that recognises that employers want NVQs but employees want academic credit for their CVs – hence this form of dual qualification encourages willing participation.

However, initiatives such as Modern Apprenticeships, the development of the Welsh Baccalaureate and the Welsh Modern Skills Diploma for Adults (MSDA) are showing a more imaginative mix of vocational and academic components. This approach is also being adopted successfully in the new Scottish Qualifications Framework.

The development of Foundation Degrees is also positive because the admissions criteria provide a more realistic opportunity for utilising N/SVQs and NOS-based awards under APEL arrangements.

Overall, it appears that, where the demand exists for higher-level S/NVQ and NOS-based awards, it is likely to be articulated in the form of 'hybrid' awards or related to the requirements for membership of professional bodies and/or licence to practise.

3. Assessment and completion: One of the most common barriers candidates meet in relation to N/SVQs relates to the assessment methodology. This appears to relate to the language used (jargon) and the interpretation of the specific NOS used. It is felt by various contributors that there are unrealistic expectations of the time needed to complete and that there is a lack of critical thinking and reflection at the higher levels. When these barriers are added to the problems HE appears to experience with criterion-referenced assessment, a significant staff development need emerges – which, in turn, leads to the perception of resource constraints.

There are two fairly obvious solutions to this dilemma. One is that, as happens at Glamorgan, critical reflection is an integral part of the NVQ portfolio. The second solution, favoured by the Royal Society of Chemistry, is that, as part of a professional chemist's career progression, the NVQ at level 5 is a post-qualification award, typically achieved after several years' practice as a Chartered Chemist.

There was also a small amount of work carried out in around 1997 on mapping the old Training & Development NVQ awards to University programmes and vice versa in order to determine whether some form of APEL could apply NVQ/university award and university award/NVQ. Whilst the outcome was largely inconclusive, it demonstrated merit in the development of methods of 'reverse mapping', ie. mapping existing training, education and assessment provision onto N/SVQs.

The complex nature of N/SVQ assessment and verification, instead of enhancing quality, may prove to be a hindrance to a more cohesive system in HE. It is a moot point as to whether this should be viewed as an external or an internal barrier. The reality seems to be that individual HEIs feel responsible for exerting an additional layer of quality assurance upon that regulated by QCA and the other regulators – which requires additional resources.

4. Key skills: There is an ongoing debate at HE level as to what key skills actually comprise and what are the 'graduate skills' expected by employers. Whilst occasionally utilising the content of the QCA key skills, HE seems to have universally rejected the QCA assessment system and has turned, instead to the use of portfolios. This might seem a strange approach in the light of HE's difficulties with portfolio assessment for N/SVQs! On the positive side, however, this could become a turning point in HE to enable wider acceptance of portfolio-driven methods of assessment.

An additional issue here relates to the concept of whether HEIs should be developing students with 'graduate skills' or simply 'employment skills'. As an increasing proportion of students entering HE might not aspire to graduate status, the general skills required in employment could become more appropriate.

5. Comparability/equivalence: There can be little debate that an academic-vocational divide exists and this leads directly to attitudinal problems in HE relating to N/SVQs. At higher levels, however, it has been felt for some time that the potential linking point is the knowledge and understanding. In addition, as HE is now moving to outcome-based assessment, opportunities are likely to be opening. The use of NOS here is an opportunity that HE could adopt, not only to inform content, but also to develop appropriate assessment mechanisms.

The style of writing and assessing NOS-based qualifications does not lend itself to making comparisons of content. However, the emerging new qualifications frameworks in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland include level descriptors and will, in time, also include credit rating – which could allow an assessment of 'content match' to be made. The current arrangements for the operation of credit (ten notional learning hours equal one credit point) is another step forward, but it operates on a single HEI basis within awards. In order to move forward, this needs to operate between institutions.

There are implications here for four-nation policies, curriculum design and staff development. The use of NOS here would be invaluable.

6. Credit: A positive approach to the allocation of credit and its accumulation and transfer is important in stimulating demand for vocational education and training in HE. The key to this is the ability to offer credit which is transferable between academic and vocational schemes. A more flexible scheme of credit accumulation and transfer could facilitate lifelong learning, allowing individuals to build portfolios of credit or records of achievement as they move in and through the system.

Once again, HE is moving in this direction, but the development of a continuous record of achievement for all learners is hampered by bureaucracy such as the absence of a lifelong personal identifier for educational purposes.

Some HEIs are able to offer N/SVQs as progression pathways for candidates who might be less confident in academic settings. For example, NVQ level 3 in Pharmaceutical Dispensing can be used as access to Pharmacy degrees and NVQ level 3 in Journalism can allow access to degrees in English.

The increase in progression routes from Modern Apprenticeships to degrees and the increasing development of Foundation Degrees also encourage the acceptance of credit awarded for N/SVQs. However, this system is not without criticism as the amount of work which goes into the development of an N/SVQ portfolio is significantly undervalued within systems of credit. Another argument regarding the incompatibility of N/SVQ and HE assessment revolves around the fact that examinations traditionally only test a percentage of students' capabilities whereas all N/SVQ units have to be evidenced. This discrepancy needs to be accounted for in any APEL processes applied.

Overall, methods need to be applied that give credit for the learning and reflection contained within the portfolio rather than for the activities themselves in isolation.

7. Quality assurance and assessment arrangements: Changes in HE assessment mechanisms to a more outcomes-based approach naturally involve a move away from norm-referenced assessment towards criterion-referenced assessment.

NOS are required to be employer-led, but the government's vision in the mid-1990s was that HE would take a significant advisory role at the higher levels. This vision has been rarely recognised and HE continues to stand back from NOS development. There may be an argument that some NOS developers avoid too much HE input because of fears that they could become too academic! In addition, this is due partly to the inarticulation and lack of synergy between the QCA and QAA audit regimes. The two systems remain distinct – which has the net effect of proliferating audit. This is largely due to issues of governance within HEIs which enable them to award degrees but not N/SVQs as well as lack of development of credit allocation and accumulation systems and methods of recognising APEL.

A fundamental issue throughout this, therefore, is the fact that NOS are not yet seen as suitable tools for curriculum development. They have not always been free to obtain in an accessible format and sources of supply to HE are not always obvious. QCA has fairly recently drafted new protocols for NOS development and involvement of HE is again on the agenda, particularly at the strategic level.

A continuing barrier is the relationship between awarding bodies regulated by QCA, SQA, ACCAC and CCEA and the universities who have their own awarding powers. There may be innovative ways of making this interface more flexible, but it is likely that it would only happen on a piecemeal basis through individual HEIs. HEIs find a standard level of credit difficult to award where N/SVQs have been awarded by different awarding bodies. This is due to a persistent perception that standards vary between awarding bodies. The recently published NVQ Code of Practice attempts to reduce this in the future.

Within HE, the assessment of N/SVQs is looked upon as a 'closed shop'. HEI staff, rightly or wrongly, believe that they should not be required to undertake specific training and certification (assessor units) in order to demonstrate competence to assess criterion-referenced portfolios. A barrier is also created, again rightly or wrongly, when specific academic staff are deemed not to have the relevant occupational competence to assess specific N/SVQs. In reality, if they are career academics, this is likely to be true! These requirements are, effectively, a 'licence to practise' which academics believe they already hold by dint of professional assessment experience, and particularly if they are members of ILT or hold QTS.

8. The four nations: Regardless of location, all HEIs are autonomous in terms of awarding degrees, allocating credit etc. Regardless of location, all NVQs and NOS-related qualifications are regulated jointly by QCA (England), ACCAC (Wales) and CCEA (N.Ireland). SVQs are regulated by SQA in Scotland. QAA is currently creating a new qualifications framework alongside equivalent developments in the four nations for the non-HE areas. QAA and QCA have a joint working group but it will be critical to try to ensure adequate and effective articulation between the two frameworks – particularly at the HE interface.

Proposed action needed to address the issues

A composite paper on external and internal barriers was presented to the NTO National Council's Employer Champion's Group by UVAC with a series of overarching action points for review. As the majority of these action points relate to external issues and barriers, the list is repeated here in full.

The Employer Champions Group was advised to consider taking action to achieve:

- a clear policy statement from the DfES on the future of NVQ/SVQ, particularly the higher levels and the positive role higher education can play in this
- a national public relations campaign to change perceptions based on researched papers and data
- the establishment of a national database for NVQ/SVQ and NOS, including those in development and not in general use
- a knowledge brokerage network of employers, professional bodies and HEIs dedicated to NVQ/SVQ and NOS, including the research and dissemination of market intelligence
- the identification, evaluation and dissemination of case studies of curriculum models, assessment regimes and integration of NOS in HE and industry through referenced publication
- kitemarking of good practice
- DfES and HEFCE discrete funding of NVQ/SVQ with similar arrangements in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland
- an investigation into a single national credit and accumulation transfer scheme, which crosses the education and training divide and which is simple and easy to understand by employers, employees and learners
- the establishment of a working party to resolve the quality assurance burden and confusion generated by QCA and QAA for HEIs operating NVQ/SVQ
- a funded programme of HE staff development, including work experience
- a co-ordinating national body to take the lead on ensuring that government targets for HE and the national learning targets are met through NVQ/SVQ in partnership with employers by increasing learning in the workplace.

Foundation Degrees and Managing Consortia

Professor Robin Smith, Pro Vice Chancellor, Anglia Polytechnic University

The key to approaching the issue of the management of consortia resides in the origins of the Foundation Degrees currently running and what we mean by consortia. I would contrast the concept of consortium with that of partnership. Consortia, at least as they emerged from the various documents emanating from the DfES and HEFCE, are not to my mind the same as partnerships. Partnership is a much stronger concept. Partnership implies 'conscious and active participation'. It is a matter of doubt that, at least as originally established, the Foundation Degree consortia can always be described as partnerships. Certainly the speed at which many were thrown together meant that employers and indeed staff generally felt less than totally engaged.

The origins of the Foundation Degree were less to do with the development of a carefully honed concept derived through recognition of the need for such an award across the academic community, and more to do with the government's desire to achieve certain key policy objectives. It is from these policy objectives that the particular shape and the concept of the Foundation Degree are drawn and it is from these that the centrality of consortia to Foundation Degrees is derived. However, to make the imposed framework for these degrees effective, real partnerships are essential.

Although the HE community was allegedly involved in the final modelling of the framework, in fact the Consultative Document (DfEE 2000) already contained most of the drivers. These subsequently found voice in the Prospectus (HEFCE 2000). The Consultative Document advocated that Foundation Degrees "will be developed through collaboration between universities, colleges and employers" (from the Foreword by David Blunkett).

The 'Blunkett model' was essentially accepted as the model for the Foundation Degree. It was in place almost before the consultation document was launched. The die had already been cast. The prototypes and the development monies (whilst an important bonus for those that received it) can hardly be seen as an important part of a strategy to pilot the new idea and mould it in the light of experience and research thereby testing the 'consortia hypothesis'. Otherwise why would HEFCE have encouraged Foundation Degrees to be developed in parallel outside the prototype initiative? The Foundation Degree was essentially launched as it was primarily conceived. The Foundation Degree Prospectus (foreworded by Tessa Blackstone) was little different to the Consultative Document launched by David Blunkett. As she stated: "The consortia approach that underpins these prototypes provides a marvellous opportunity to unlock vast potential and to generate creative responses to the delivery of higher education."

The benefits of consortia were not articulated, they were assumed. Of course the role of consortia and partnerships is made even more complex by the re-badgers. Some existing awards have been re-badged or adapted as Foundation Degrees by some institutions, seemingly without the need to confront the tricky issues inherent in the development of Foundation Degrees from scratch, involving employers within a consortium context. In the context of the Foundation Degree, consortia are fundamental, simply because, almost uniquely in HE, the government said 'let it be so', even if it is not so!

Employer involvement is the first in a list of essential features of the Foundation Degree. They were expected to contribute to the design and review of the programmes, to achieve recognition for the award and establish demand. Thus at the heart of the Foundation Degree have developed worthy notions of collaboration, partnership and co-operation across the FE, HE and employer divides.

So what are the particular benefits and pitfalls in the context of Foundation Degrees regarding partnerships and consortia which have to be managed? I intend to approach this through the three key players involved in the development and operation of these degrees. These are:

- Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)
- Further Education Colleges (FECs)
- Employers, NTOs and professional bodies

But three others are important:

- Government
- National agencies such as HEFCE and QAA
- Students.

These six are, of course, players in the Foundation Degree concept but cannot all be judged as partners since it cannot be said they all fulfil the true requirements of effective partnership, namely “the conscious and active participation of all partners” (p594, Smith & Betts 2000). In real terms consortia are the awarding HEI and partner FECs. However much an overstated part of the government’s vision, it is unlikely that employers will ever play a central role in the management and operation of the Foundation Degree. It is not their business, as anyone who has tried to involve employers in this direct way will know. They can be partners, however, but real involvement will only follow real self-interest. The true concept of the Foundation Degree will only take off if each employer recognises it as addressing the specific needs of their business and employees.

So why are the consortia important to universities? It could be argued that consortia activities provide a special context in which universities can participate in new developments whilst keeping them at the margins. The consortium is a ‘safe place’ for shared activity, diverting attention from ownership, and therefore not compromising either the traditional values or perceived core business of any partner.

Universities are being challenged by, for some, an imposed agenda of:

- regionalism
- vocationalism
- widening access
- overcoming social exclusion and
- increasing student numbers.

From the HEIs’ perspective, especially those that are uncomfortable with this mission, the consortium approach provides an opportunity to meet externally imposed requirements without damaging the traditional ethos of the university. The FE partnership provides a strategic way forward, especially for some pre-1992 universities.

Less cynically however, there are key long-term benefits. We should not underestimate the benefit the consortium approach brings. A radical agenda, including for example work-based activity, is more comfortably and effectively developed by sharing the issues with partners representing other universities, FECs and employers respectively. The Foundation Degree represents a real opportunity for the sector to engage with the new learning agenda. Also, if universities are to become learning organisations in their own right and develop their staff through a process of learning from their own and other experiences, then they have much to learn from colleagues in the FE and business sectors.

The different quality assurance cultures, learning and teaching processes, support and guidance regimes in FE (and in business for that matter) offer much to the university facing new recruitment and retention targets and a different kind of student.

The pitfalls for the HEIs are also significant, relating especially to issues of quality and standards. And these above all need to be managed. University reputations are now more dependent than ever upon externally derived indicators. League tables in newspapers present a powerful influence in HE and on students. They do not reflect the vocational agenda as favourably as they might. FD consortia produce challenges for quality assurance which

have to be managed. FE institutions are not universities. They have different cultures, learning philosophies, resource strategies, management styles and research traditions. Yet ultimately, in the context of QAA processes, the university is held responsible for the quality of the provision in that area. Quality assurance processes at a distance are expensive in terms of time, finance and reputation.

In addition, the university, as the lead body in the consortium (as the awarding body), needs to invest considerably in developing successful strategies to overcome the lack of clarity that can emerge from several autonomous institutions coming together to market, recruit and deliver a complex non-traditional programme with all the support structures that these need.

The pitfalls from the point of view of the FECs are significant. The first, and perhaps most significant, is financial and again this needs to be managed effectively. They must ensure that the arrangement is financially advantageous to them. This means negotiating with the HEI a good financial deal which ensures an adequate flow of income in relation to the number of students. It means also that the FEC has to cost in the additional burden of developing and delivering an HE programme and put in place a set of quality assurance procedures which operate in addition to those applying to FE programmes more generally. In some cases tutors will be required, or will demand lighter, teaching loads than other colleagues in order to engage in HE activity (eg. research). Whether staff's research is seen as fundamental to the successful delivery of Foundation Degrees is of course an, as yet, untested proposition. The fundamental question being asked is whether a new HE Level 2 programme with the title Degree is somehow more HE in nature than an existing HE Level 2 programme, such as the HND.

As with any partnership with a body that oversees both the purse strings and the control of standards, as is the case with university/FEC consortia, there is a loss of institutional autonomy. This makes it very important for the processes behind each aspect of the management and operation of the Foundation Degree to be made very clear through appropriate Memoranda of Co-operation.

The government clearly thought employers gain something from the Foundation Degree consortium in expecting employers, SSCs/NTOs and professional bodies to be involved in the design and review of programmes. More than this, the prospectus said: "It would also be highly desirable if employers took an active part in the delivery of Foundation Degrees" (p7, HEFCE 2000).

Of course what the prospectus says and what employers think, and more importantly do, is another matter. Employers do not see themselves for the most part as being educationalists. They see themselves as meeting the needs of their markets. These needs do not, by tradition in the UK, include meeting the long-term learning needs of the sector to ensure sustainability and development. HEIs will have a difficult task ahead of them to develop sophisticated relationships with employers who are now expected to engage in student mentoring and assessment. Again the university is confronted with all manner of QA problems if a part of the programme is delivered via the work base. However, Foundation Degrees will lose currency without this employer support. A quality partnership costs employers real money and time. The benefits are just as real but less easily measured.

In conclusion, if the educationalists in the consortia fail to engage employers in the development of Foundation Degrees as active partners, a real opportunity will have been missed and Foundation Degrees will be the poorer for it. If government fails to provide incentives for employer involvement they will have failed to engage them effectively in higher education.

Notes

I am indebted to my colleague Mick Betts who is co-authoring a paper on which this presentation is based.

DfEE (2000) Foundation Degree Consultation Paper, DfEE

HEFCE (2000) Foundation Degree Prospectus, HEFCE

Smith, R and Betts, M (2000) Learning as Partners: Realising the Potential of Work-based Learning, Journal of Vocational Education and Training, 52 (4).

Implementing Graduate Apprenticeships at the University of Teesside – a case study

Professor Graham Henderson, Deputy Vice Chancellor, University of Teesside

The University of Teesside are offering a Graduate Apprenticeship in e-skills leading to a University Certificate in Advanced Professional Development in E-Skills, which carries 60 CATS credits at level 1. The programme is currently graduate entry only, being delivered after rather than alongside undergraduate study – although consideration is currently being given to a proposal to launch a parallel pathway for students undertaking periods of extended (12-month) industrial placement.

The programme is designed around a national framework model, based upon five modules, and is delivered over a 52-week period. Some participants initially had aspirations to complete the programme in a shorter period of time, but experience suggests that the pressure of completing the programme alongside full-time employment requires at least 52 weeks for successful attainment of the programme's learning outcomes.

Recruitment and intake profile

The primary vehicles for promoting the programme have been:

- direct contact with final-year undergraduates
- promotional activity with relevant employers, and
- promotional activity through the University's "Bridges and Routes" projects.

Recruitment to the programme has, to date, predominantly comprised engineering graduates from the University of Teesside, although some participants have been recruited from a wider market.

Seven students were recruited to the first cohort in 2001 and a further 15 students in 2002. All 22 students have been in full-time employment within an e-skills environment at the point of recruitment to the programme, mainly in either the engineering or construction industries.

Of the seven students recruited to the programme in 2001, two have already successfully completed the UCAPD award and completion is imminent for a further three students. The remaining two students were forced to withdraw from the programme due to pressure of work and the conflicting demands of the work-based project, but both students have indicated an intention to return to the programme in the not too distant future.

As mentioned, two students tried, unsuccessfully, to complete the programme within one semester but found the workload required, in addition to their work and family commitments, to be excessive.

Programme structure

The programme comprises five modules, namely:

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| Module 1: | A work-based project |
| Module 2: | A level 4 key skills module comprising three elements – communication, problem-solving and working with others |
| Module 3: | Managing own learning (an existing University level 1 undergraduate module) |
| Modules 4 & 5: | Two "taught" IT modules to be selected from an extensive list of approved modules in such areas as database applications, visual programming, internet/web authoring, multimedia applications, spreadsheet programming etc. |

Students begin work on their work-based project at the outset of the programme, and modules 1 to 3 all run for the entire year. Success in the work-based project will normally ensure attainment of all of the key skills learning outcomes, and participants are invited to begin to look at aspects of their key skills development and associated skills deficits when the project is about 50 per cent completed.

Assessment

The two IT modules are assessed using in-course assessments and examinations as defined by the standard module descriptors for the modules chosen.

Assessment of modules 1 to 3 takes the following forms:

- Work-based project: project report
- Key skills: a skills portfolio
- Managing own learning: assessed through three elements, namely a personal development plan, learning agreement and reflective report.

The assessment of modules 1 to 3 is, however, submitted as ONE composite submission covering the learning outcomes of all three modules.

Delivery pattern

Delivery of the programme typically involves two to three hours per week of formal input to the chosen IT modules, in addition to the following additional structured inputs:

- Two hours per week with the Graduate Apprenticeship tutor to review work undertaken and progress to date, and receive structured input in a number of areas prioritised by the members of the student group. Typical areas where input has been provided include costing, motivation, appraisal techniques, group dynamics, customer service and selling
- One-to-one support, provided through a system of scheduled appointments, either at the students' place of work or at the University
- All students receive at least two workplace visits during the course of the programme to review their progress on the programme and any support needs they may have.

In addition to the formal inputs provided by University staff, all participants in the programme have a work-based mentor for their work-based projects. (Of the 22 participants to date, only one company has failed to provide an appropriate work-based mentor.) The input from these mentors is supplemented by input from a dedicated University-based GA tutor who fulfils a wider mentor role across all other aspects of the programme.

Experience suggests that choosing an appropriate work-based project is critical to both the likely success and added-value of the programme. Ideally, a good work-based project should both succeed in enhancing their understanding of their employing organisation and provide effective opportunity for the development of the three key skills covered by the award. Work-based projects directly linked to the students' current employment role have typically proved to be most effective, whereas some minor problems have been experienced in relation to students undertaking "research-based" projects looking at wider aspects of the company within which they are employed.

Resourcing of the programme

The University currently employs a dedicated GA Programme Tutor within the Centre for Lifelong Learning. The activities of this individual and the wider organisation and delivery of the programme are supported by an administrator within the Centre for Lifelong Learning, the Bridges and Routes Administrator within the Department of Academic Enterprise and an Academic Co-ordinator within the University's School of Computing and Mathematics (who have responsibility for the provision of the IT modules).

Success and sustainability of the programme

All employer feedback to date has been excellent, with employers frequently commenting upon:

- the significant contribution that participants have made to enhancing organisational effectiveness
- the significant enhancement of the individual skills set of the participants, and
- the rapid career advancement of the participants, not least as a result of their participation in the programme.

The University is confident that there is potentially a large market for a programme of this type, particularly if it is possible to expose potential students to the programme before graduation. Further, the University believes that the option of adapting the learning outcomes of its 12-month industrial placements to coincide with those of the Graduate Apprenticeship could, in some circumstances, allow students undertaking extended periods of industrial placement to simultaneously meet the requirements for a GA award.

In addition, the University is also seeking to enhance the credibility of the award still further by enabling successful participants to qualify for the National Standards Council Certificate in E-Skills in addition to their Graduate Apprenticeship/UCAPD. This will hopefully further enhance the credibility of the programme with employers and serve to secure its long-term success.

Efforts to secure the long-term financial viability of the GA award have resulted in the attainment of the GA award being directly linked to the learning outcomes achieved through the completion of a discrete HEFCE-funded University of Teesside HE qualification.

The delivery model currently in place at Teesside is, however, highly dependent upon the co-operation of employers (for both the provision of appropriate work-based projects and the mentoring of students throughout the project process) and the future success and sustainability of the programme will be dependent upon both maintaining the existing level of employer involvement and undertaking further work to raise awareness of the programme and its potential benefits.

Consideration is also being given to the potential flexibility of the delivery model, for example:

- making the time to complete the award as flexible as possible, subject to a stated maximum period of registration, and
- offering some of the IT modules in web-based or open and distance learning format to minimise the requirement for formal attendance at the University.

Recognising that the programme is focusing upon the development of e-skills, consideration will also be given to the possibility of supporting the implementation of other elements of the programme through e-learning. It is anticipated, however, that some face-to-face development and support activities will still need to take place to guarantee the effective, ongoing engagement of all stakeholders in the programme.

Other Topics Covered during the Proceedings included:

■ COVEs and NTIs

John Widdowson, New College Durham; member of the Mixed Economy Group of FECs

Centres of Vocational Excellence cover a broad range of vocational areas, with a concentration on Level 3 attainment. They have strong employer links and focus on progression to employment. Although there is no specific reference to HE progression in their criteria, they are complementary to National Technology Institutes, which address skills shortages in advanced ICT skills from NVQ 3 to Foundation Degree, with pathways to Honours degree. There is a wide range of applications and a variety of partnership models. The challenges are to create links between COVEs, NTIs and other relevant bodies to benefit learners and employers. We need to map the curriculum to identify progression pathways and gaps, and persuade employers in 'new' industries of the benefits of HE skills.

■ The LSC role in supporting participation in HE

Caroline Neville, LSC

The LSC is working jointly with HE to map out the agenda. This includes integrating Advanced Modern Apprenticeships into HE Compacts and courses for technicians, professionals and managers. Curriculum Partnerships are being developed with HEIs, SSCs and Awarding Bodies.

■ HE/business consortia

Mike Killingley, HSBC

The employer perception is that partnerships are difficult to establish and maintain, being dependent upon individual commitment with limited organisation-wide involvement. The reality is more positive. There is a wide range of enduring partnerships embedded within organisational processes and supported by national initiatives including to UVAC, LTSN, STEP and the Research Councils. To change employer perceptions we need to develop case studies of good practice, use media to disseminate, target organisational and individual contact points and articulate the business benefits.

■ Establishing a coherent progression matrix

Jill Johnson, UCAS

The mass HE system is made up of disparate components and initiatives, with little evidence of joined-up thinking and no coherent communication of vocational content of HE provision. UCAS programmes to address the issues include a contract with Ufl to supply details of all HE learning opportunities to learndirect, the development of a points system to give recognition to and allow broad comparisons between different types of achievement and increasing involvement with employer bodies and initiatives such as P4P. Potential involvement includes a proposal to undertake mapping of qualifications and experience against diversity of HE provision, and discussions with HEIs to supply details of vocational components within HE courses.

■ **Establishing a national credit/accumulation transfer system**

Monica Deasey, NICATS

At the invitation of QAA, the key national credit bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland have developed a set of credit guidelines – the basis for a national credit framework – to complement the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF). The guidelines are designed to provide guidance to institutions on the operation of credit systems and to assist them in mapping their qualifications against the QAA framework.

■ **An integrated approach to quality assurance**

Keith Waudby, e-skills UK

A UVAC kitemark would add value by bringing approval of all the relevant bodies and make Foundation Degrees and Graduate Apprenticeships more marketable. It would simplify arrangements through a single validation document and report and one set of annual monitoring reports. The e-skills Graduate Apprenticeship accreditation process provides an example of this in practice.

■ **Resource and cost implications of integrating education and training systems**

Judith Vincent, Thames Valley University; Phil Birtles, Bucks and Chilterns University College

Employers are usually willing to pay where tangible benefits can be identified and may therefore contribute to curriculum development, training and development diagnostics (TNA), mentoring/learner support and equipment. They are usually unwilling to pay for FE/HE bureaucracy, programme validation criteria (QCA, QAA and/or FE/HEI), marketing and publicity. For full employer engagement, both senior and line management needed to be committed to the programme. Employers also needed to be involved in workplace assessment and continual programme development.

■ **Accessing the workplace via an FE/HE partnership**

Kate Anderson, Middlesex University

Most earmarked funding calls for partnership/collaboration. Such partnerships provide FE and HE training and qualification routes in one package, a wider network of employers and a wider range of expertise. There are issues around definitions, building trust, who leads on particular initiatives, modes of delivery and institutional infrastructures. There is a need for hybrid funding programmes that span FE and HE.

Issues raised in discussion groups included:

- How do we determine what employers want from HE? Is there a perception problem with today's graduates and do employers really know what they want HE to deliver? Is it 'thinking skills' or 'vocational skills'? If vocationalism is what employers want, how do we explain the preference to recruit from pre-1992 universities? We must define and promote the 'added value' of vocationalism to employers – what does it offer and add to their businesses? NOS are a useful tool to do this – but are they of the right quality, do they reflect the skills required by sectors, how are they accessed etc? HE must be more involved in the NOS development process.
- We must be able to articulate the 'added value' of vocationalism to potential HE entrants. What does vocationalism offer in terms of better jobs, career pathways, and the opportunity for employer sponsorship (re student debt)? Such messages, with notable exceptions, do not appear to be adequately promoted.
- How do we maximise the employer contribution, in terms of facilities, expertise and funding in the delivery of HE? Systems are needed to accredit and attach greater value to learning at an employer's premises.
- Progression can be difficult because HEIs lack an understanding of NVQs, MAs etc. HEIs (with certain exceptions) have very little involvement in the development or design of NVQs and MAs. Technical certificates were introduced to enhance the knowledge content of MAs and increase their acceptance by HE, but there seems to have been little involvement of HEIs in the technical certificate identification and incorporation process. More work is needed to map out progression routes linking NVQs, MAs, FDs, GAs, honours degrees and professional qualifications.

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