

## Employer engagement: the new widening participation?

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**Abstract** *This article looks at the business-facing activity now growing across the UK higher education (HE) sector and discusses some of its many names and guises. It uses some case studies from the University of Teesside, including a work-based studies programme, Summer University and several successful workplace interventions, to set the policy agenda in context and suggests that there is more than skills and training at stake, with HE level learning offering much more than this to the individual who is undertaking learning.*

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### What is in a name?

Whatever the chosen term - workforce development, work-based learning and employer engagement are some of the different and overlapping terms for working with learning and development opportunities for employers and employees - business-facing activity is definitely on the increase in the higher education (HE) sector, both in terms of the curriculum being delivered and the profile and status this kind of activity is gaining. This has been stimulated further by the focus the Government has given to higher level skills in recent years and the connections made by government research and publications (for example the Leitch Review of 2006; *Higher Education at Work, High Skills: High Value* (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2008a), etc.) between equipping the workforce with higher level skills and the subsequent increased profitability of the UK. Some institutions have chosen to develop this favoured government agenda more than others, in keeping with their institution's existing strengths and activities. Most universities and colleges have been involved in 'developing the workforce' in one way or another for as long as they have been in existence. Vocational courses were the core of the polytechnic system and equipping students for professional life has always been an outcome for even the most traditional and ancient seats of learning. However, since the Leitch Review sharpened the focus on the extent to which the UK cannot be called 'world-class' while it lags considerably behind comparable countries in

productivity and profitability, and due to the fact that this gap is only set to increase as others continue to improve, it has become increasingly obvious that education professionals must in some way address this.

Government initiatives such as the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) Strategic Development Fund (SDF) offer funding 'to support a wide range of collaborative arrangements for facilitating strategic change and development that will benefit the sector as a whole' (HEFCE, 2003). Many universities have taken this opportunity to develop initiatives which directly tackle the issues around bringing more employed learners to HE and/or ensure that adequate employability skills are delivered in the HE curriculum (a full list of projects is available at <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Finance/fundinghe/sdf/projects.xls>). The challenges involved include ensuring that quality standards are maintained, offering appropriate learning opportunities in terms of content, timing, location, assessment, etc., providing adequate staff development (for the staff of the higher education institutions (HEIs) involved), developing a research and publication identity for this agenda and so on. Some HEIs have a good track record of this kind of business-facing activity.

### A case study

The following case study with the University of Teesside offers examples of ongoing activity together with details of future plans to

contextualise how employer engagement might be considered to be the new 'widening participation', in as much as it is successfully offering HE level learning opportunities to new learners who, without these specialist interventions, would not otherwise have been able to engage with HE level learning.

Much focused and strategic activity has recently been initiated. However, the university has always offered many opportunities to part-time students and has been particularly successful in attracting mature local students, many of whom are also employed. The ongoing university offer has facilitated the participation of such 'non-traditional' students with initiatives such as short course provision, work placements and secondments, partnership working with local further education (FE) colleges and local businesses (such as Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) - see <http://www.tees.ac.uk/sections/business/gradrec.cfm>), and delivering a work-based studies programme, which can offer accredited certification up to honours degrees and postgraduate awards.

### **Work-based studies programme**

Teesside's work-based studies programme (see [http://www.tees.ac.uk/sections/parttime/work\\_based\\_studies.cfm](http://www.tees.ac.uk/sections/parttime/work_based_studies.cfm)), aimed at employed learners, has grown in strength from year to year and now enrolls approximately 50 new learners each year. Although based in the university's Business School it operates as a university-wide collaboration which enrolls students from all subject disciplines and allows students up to eight years of part-time study to complete their chosen award route. The programme is becoming increasingly attractive to the six academic schools of the university as the culture of the institution, in line with much of the HE sector, changes to one which aims to engage with employers. The cross-disciplinary nature of the programme is essential as many of the employed learners operate in the workplace in ways which overlap several subject disciplines, for example, engineering plus leadership or classroom management plus computing. The programme utilises a pre-validated modular framework consisting of certain core modules which students must undertake and equally many empty sections which can be filled in myriad different, appropriately contextualised ways. This skeleton structure can be fleshed out to encompass the examples above and is flexible

enough to meet individual requirements. This flexibility goes beyond content; it is also key to the way in which the programme is delivered. For example, all of the core modules are delivered outside of standard work hours. They provide vital skills for all students regardless of background, such as skills of self-assessment and audit, skills of planning and organisation (all students need to write a learning agreement each year which sets out their academic plan), research skills, reflective skills and skills of continuing professional development - CPD (which also satisfy the requisite 'progress file' element of any HE level programme as they map and support both personal and professional development and encourage an ethos of continuing development in the individual).

The programme actively accredits prior learning (APL), taking into account both experiential and certificated learning. This means that work-based learners gain credit towards their award by evidencing appropriate learning already undertaken. This acknowledgement is very empowering for students who, often, think they are out of place in a university environment and have somehow 'missed their chance' (learners joining the programme tend to be mature students who have often, but not always, had no experience of learning environments since leaving compulsory schooling). An extremely high percentage of the programme's graduates comment on their evaluation sheets that they could never have gained a degree or undertaken HE level study without the programme. This is evidence that the programme truly widens participation amongst a diverse group of individuals whose lives and previous qualifications/experience do not make it readily apparent how they would engage with an HEI and what they would bring to this engagement and/or obtain from it.

The title of the degrees gained via this pathway are 'Work-Based Studies' with a subject or sector in brackets - the inserts are typically, 'business', 'education', 'engineering', etc. New titles are validated on an ongoing basis via the individual academic schools' own academic standards committees. This ensures that appropriate titles and opportunities become available for our students within the rigorous quality framework already in place. Whilst the generic framework of the scheme operates well from a central team or department, the input of the subject specialists across the academic schools of the entire university is also vital.

As with many traditional degrees the students on this programme must undertake a large project or dissertation. This represents 40 credits at level 6 - the equivalent of undergraduate third year. A key difference with this scheme, and a real plus for them, is that the students can also undertake, as well as this large summative piece, almost as many extra projects as they wish to, taking into account level, subject and requisite core modules. If it is in keeping with students' profiles and areas of expertise then it is allowed and indeed valid for them to largely populate their programme with work-based projects. Before work-based projects can be undertaken the student must complete a 'Research Methods' module, 20 credits at either level 5 or 6 (equivalent to undergraduate years 2 and 3). Work-based projects are very useful to both students and employers as they allow the students to transform a piece of work that they may have to undertake anyway into an academic assignment - obviously for those working full time this is very attractive as it is time-efficient due to reduced campus attendance when compared with more standard modules. Feedback from employers shows that they are happy to have access to the university's research resources and are impressed with the written piece of work, which usually far exceeds, in terms of research and academic rigour, any report they may otherwise have expected.

The programme tends to attract certain key sectors, for example, teaching assistants and unqualified teachers who need a degree to progress, engineers, those working in various business environments, police professionals, etc. The learners who choose to study like this are usually well motivated individuals (they are busy employed people choosing to fit studying into their already full lives). A profile of a representative learner follows.

### **Learner profile**

A locally employed process engineer holding a Higher National Diploma, gained within the last 5 years, obtained 120 credits at level 4 and a further 50 credits at level 5 for this prior qualification. He then gained 20 credits at level 5 for undertaking the core module which guides the students through a self-audit and the compilation of a portfolio of evidence (evening attendance). Through the submission of this portfolio he gained a further 50 credits at level 5 for his evidenced experiential learning. This accounted for 240 credits at levels 4 and 5. At level 6 he studied a taught module about

CPD (20 credits, evening attendance), and undertook 'Research Methods' (20 credits, evening attendance), an engineering module (20 credits, day release) and two work-based projects, one worth 20 credits and one, 40. The 40 credit project, equivalent to a dissertation, involved developing a completely new process for his employer. This student gained a 2:1 in 2 years.

### **More specific awards**

Because the programme exists as a flexible validated framework, it also offers a speedy route to creating customised awards for employers within already validated parameters. It offers a robust skeleton of generic activity which can be fleshed out in very many different ways. This has proved a valuable option in the writing of new degrees, foundation degrees and smaller awards, such as university certificates. These university certificates (20, 30 and 60 credits) can offer an ideal 'toe in the water' experience for those new to HE, and perhaps somewhat anxious. The University of Teesside has offered a very successful Summer University (see [http://www.tees.ac.uk/sections/parttime/summer\\_courses.cfm](http://www.tees.ac.uk/sections/parttime/summer_courses.cfm)) for the last ten years which attracts many new learners to HE as well as helping existing students to 'brush up' on specific skills. The short intensive style of the courses makes them ideally suited to employed people as the study required can usually be fitted around the working day, or perhaps be encompassed in several days' holiday or authorised leave. Many employers are far more willing to allow several days away from the workplace in a one-off 'burst' rather than time every week for a whole term, semester or year. Some companies can provide an entire cohort of students for certain Summer University modules and in these cases the module can be delivered on their own premises.

The modules offered at Summer University are mostly at levels four and five and they tend to be short, ten credit modules. Most of these have the potential to form small certificates and many students choose to do this. This gives the students something achievable to work towards and something tangible to take away from the experience. They can also build on the award at future Summer Universities or use it to gain advanced standing on one of several degrees. By using the HEFCE widening participation fund, the university is able to keep the price of enrolment affordable. In the last 3 years the numbers

enrolling have climbed from 900 to 1400 with some 30 per cent of these students converting to part- or full-time programmes at the university. Students are attracted by the breadth of modules on offer and the way that the offer is constantly updated. Some of the popular modules include 'Digital Media', 'Criminology and Forensics', 'Creative Writing', 'Dissertation and Report Writing Skills' and so on. The success of Summer University has led to the development of Spring University, now in its third year. This means that there are more opportunities for non-traditional learners for more months of the year. The ultimate aim is to have flexible short courses running for the full calendar year. Spring University has proved to be as popular as Summer University; using the tried and tested model of offering courses on an intensive basis at flexible times and locations has meant that we are increasingly using this format for employer engagement activities and to reach students who could not otherwise have attended more traditional offerings.

## **A workforce development strategy**

Several successful employer engagement projects have paved the way for the implementation of a university-wide workforce development strategy. The APEX project, funded by Aimhigher, and the Negotiated Learning Framework, funded by the Learning and Skills Council, are just two examples of these. Both were aimed at bringing new employed learners to HE, primarily from local companies (across the five Tees Valley boroughs) and often from small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The majority of these participants had thought in the past that HE was an option for them. The students undertook 10 and 30 credit bites of learning and often chose to continue the experience via Summer University or by enrolling on one of the university's existing degree programmes, in particular the work-based studies programme. The projects focused on continuous development and encouraging reflective learning which equipped the learners well for further HE level learning as well as getting the most out of their employment.

The projects also had outcomes based around accrediting appropriate existing in-company training. This was done by mapping the training activities to existing university level descriptors and, usually, by adding an appropriate assessment. Contact hours between student and tutor were also taken into account and many of the companies

involved were surprised and pleased to find that their training was on a par with HE level learning. The projects also encouraged collaboration with our partner FE colleges and this worked well, meaning that employers were offered a seamless picture. Some of the companies that the project team visited had a rather jaded view of HEIs in that they expected us to try simply to 'hard sell' them our existing courses. Our willingness to write new programmes of learning and to devise completely appropriate new modules and programmes really impressed them and resulted in many innovative new modules which genuinely filled gaps. For example, the project team facilitated a collaboration between a local retail company with a chain of convenience stores and Teesside Business School which created a new management development programme consisting of 3 20 credit modules at level 4, creating a 60 credit UCAPD (University Certificate in Advanced Professional Development in Resource Management in the Retail Sector). The starting point for this intervention was the company's high quality and continuously evolving, but non-accredited in-house training. Several successful cohorts have undertaken this award and a choice of progression routes has been developed. Teesside Business School has continued, and greatly developed, this kind of business-facing activity with particular emphasis on leadership and management opportunities, an extremely popular area of study for companies.

Creating new programmes like the one above often meets business clients' needs. However, there are also numerous diverse and useful modules already in existence and many of the project learners took advantage of these modules, with 'Sage Accounting', 'Web Optimisation', 'Understanding Children's Development' and 'Introduction to Volunteering' proving very popular. What benefited many participants was a combination of new and existing modules, sometimes also including some accreditation of existing in-house training. This enabled the creation of some truly hybrid programmes of learning which were tailored exactly to the needs of the company in question. Occasionally several companies within the same sector would attend the sessions together; this was particularly useful if none of the companies involved could provide a cohort alone. The companies involved in this kind of shared delivery commented on how the networking opportunities and shared practices really enriched their learning experience.

## **Example of a programme**

A local newspaper and media company worked with us to create a year long management development programme which was of the hybrid nature mentioned previously. It is a mixture of 'off the shelf' modules, accreditation of some current training and bespoke new modules. It includes 'Supervisory Management', 'Coaching and Feedback', 'Dealing with Conflict' and more. It provides a good example of the flexible, blended approach - with the company trainers undertaking the majority of delivery on their premises and some of the delivery relying on open and distance learning. For the most part, the learners involved have no experience of HE and limited time to devote to study. The growing importance of open and distance learning with these students is very apparent. Even if they do not want to complete their whole programme at a distance it is often crucial that there is an option to do some of it in this way.

Many of the companies the university engages with have other branches elsewhere in the UK and the rest of the world, and it is sometimes the case that subsequent cohorts will enrol from these distant locations. The local retail store mentioned earlier went on to offer exactly the same programme that their Teesside staff successfully studied to their store managers elsewhere in the country, following the purchase of a further chain of shops. This was facilitated by the online capacity of the modules in question and the university's willingness to travel in order to oversee and quality assure the delivery. As well as helping University of Teesside learners to study - no matter where their job may take them at any given time - we are also developing methods of delivery to facilitate ease of learning for those enrolled on the work-based studies route. A virtual learning environment (VLE) developer has been employed to develop online versions of the core modules of the degree programme. These result in modules which are very interactive on an individual level, essential if we are to engage students who have unusual, multifaceted profiles. A lot of the activities of the programme's core modules are very personal and task-driven, making them ideal for completion at a physical distance from the tutor/s and the university campus.

The staff involved with the business-facing agenda (and this is increasingly all staff, even if their only involvement is occasionally answering a phone call

from a company) need special skills to act appropriately in the commercial world and effectively liaise between the companies and the university, often facilitating work for different departments across the university and brokering partnerships between several departments and companies. They undoubtedly need a thorough knowledge of how the academic world works; they need skills of persuasion (but 'selling' on its own is not enough); they also need to care about and understand the permutations of learning - a truly hybrid member of staff with a wider experience of life and the 'real' world is most likely to build relationships with employers, in our experience.

## **Evaluation**

The Negotiated Learning Framework project was completed in July 2008, having achieved its outcomes. Evaluation of the project's impact is currently being carried out. The companies involved are being asked what they think of the interaction that they have had with the university and their experience of their staff gaining higher level skills. All delivery was evaluated as courses were completed, in much the same way that all modules delivered in the university are evaluated for annual monitoring. However, asking the employers important questions about their perceptions of an HE intervention is something new which will hopefully provide us with some useful data for future activity. The initial responses we have received and anecdotal feedback (together with the project's achievements statistically and the feedback that the Higher Education Academy's *Impact Study* (2008) stimulated) suggest that employers are very satisfied with their interactions with the university and would almost always consider further learning opportunities.

The companies who benefit from their experience and are pleased with the results of engaging with a university are undoubtedly our best ambassadors. Using these companies as case studies is one of the most positive ways in which to communicate the message of widening participation. They prove that 'real' people manage to undertake HE level learning, usually whilst holding down full-time employment and juggling family commitments, and often after considerable periods of time away from formal learning experiences. The case studies show that companies can really benefit from encouraging their employees to continue learning throughout their working lives by engaging with opportunities which benefit them personally and

professionally. This also supports the employability agenda, as what is learned through these largely work-based initiatives can inform more traditional programmes, hopefully assisting in the production of highly employable graduates.

This eye to the 'larger picture' is typical of the way in which the university has approached the business-facing agenda. We have always undertaken our work with employers and employees with a view to fostering an ongoing interest in learning, not just a short, sharp relationship with the university doomed to end along with project funding. Historically this kind of activity has been very reliant on project funding (for example, from the European Social Fund and the Learning and Skills Council) especially in a geographic area such as the Tees Valley where small companies and deprivation predominate. The government view is that higher level skills delivery will be co-funded by the employer, and this has been put in place in part by the HEFCE co-funded student numbers. Our investigations so far suggest that employers who have received high quality education for one cohort of students are then willing to pay for subsequent cohorts (however, if their own training staff are delivering the sessions this is a limited fee to cover the university's quality assurance process).

There is diversity in the market with some employers presuming that they will have to pay fees and feeling that any education offered too cheaply is probably of low quality. This is the opposite end of the spectrum to the companies who would not have consulted with us without some kind of initial (financial) incentive for them to do so. Many employers consider that allowing their employees time away from work to attend classes and/or to study is enough of a contribution from them. This in-kind contribution often has to be calculated using the student's hourly rate of pay, etc. On the work-based studies programme the majority of the students pay their own fees, whilst those fortunate enough to receive a subsidy from their employer tend to be employed by larger companies, or to be employed as unqualified teachers at a school that is keen to see them qualified. Occasionally the financial reward takes the shape of a salary increase upon successful completion of the course, rather than the fees being paid up-front.

Companies who have not engaged with higher level skills previously are keen to know whether such

engagement, and the subsequent development of their employees, will make their company more profitable and they would particularly like to see evidence of this increased profitability from other companies, perhaps with a similar profile to theirs. The difficulty with this is obvious in that very many market factors contribute towards a company's profitability, such as business trends, changing consumer fashions and the fluctuating price of materials and overheads. Despite these complications our ongoing research into the impact of business-facing interventions (which will be published as a report when completed) is attempting to gather useful (hopefully quantifiable) data in this area.

### **The policy perspective**

Government publications on this subject tend to prioritise the economic angle, and focus upon the economic benefits of a better-qualified workforce. The higher level skills qualifications recommended will, it is claimed, make the country more profitable and wealthy, but a considerable cultural change is required before all employers will happily fund the development of their employees. Placing all of our emphasis on economic competitiveness and economically valuable skills may compromise the learning involved. If skills are considered to be only about the workplace and its profit margins then the focus becomes too narrow. Learning has the potential to improve life generally in terms of confidence and social coherence: continuous development encourages more rounded, thoughtful and capable individuals. The skills required to undertake 'learning' are crucial in themselves, skills such as dedication, discipline, enquiry and engagement - with the process, peers and the subject matter. These in turn encourage skills of analysis, critical debate, creativity, autonomy, making connections and reading widely. In a rapidly changing world where society continually evolves these are the skills which can help employees respond positively to change.

Much of this business-facing activity is described as 'employer-' or 'demand-led', and as the employer is expected to pay a proportion of the costs of the activity it does seem appropriate that they should have some input into what exactly will be delivered to their staff. However, there are issues around the delivery of skills-related packages being totally dependent on employers' needs, as these needs change and are connected to

the employer's personal agenda. This could easily be a profit-motivated agenda, not averse to producing low-quality goods and services. Employer-led provision could also be viewed as potentially marginalising the needs and aspirations of employees and other stakeholders. Some responsibility for development must lie with the employee; individuals have a duty to develop themselves and it seems reasonable to expect them sometimes to pay towards this themselves and/or to attend classes in their own time. An ideal scenario would be learning opportunities which attract, and offer something to, both employer and employee as these would ensure the employee's engagement with the learning process and also that both parties were happy to contribute in whatever way appropriate in order to make the learning take place. It is difficult to berate company owners for favouring educational interventions which develop their company, and potentially their profit margin, when they are expected to pay for them. Collaboration is key and the only way in which to guarantee satisfaction for all parties: employer, employee and provider.

As 70 per cent of the 2020 workforce are already in employment, or older than 18, it is obvious that it is necessary to target those already employed in order for there to be any possibility of achieving Lord Leitch's aspirations for 40 per cent of adults to be qualified at level 4 or above by 2020 (starting from a base of 29 per cent in 2005). However, along with this strategic targeting it is also necessary, from a young age, to encourage learners to see that skills are not only produced via qualifications, but are also learned and enhanced through practice, whether this is life practice or later, in the workplace, with qualifications providing evidence of achievement. Some academics express dismay at the thought of encouraging employer-led skills, but for too long it has been the case that HEIs merely offer what they do already, rather than asking the 'customer' what they might like or indeed even acknowledging that they have customers. To adequately address this situation requires negotiation and a shifting of position, and relies heavily on HEIs being willing to hone and alter what they deliver and to continually develop and evolve.

If employers are expected to co-fund learning it will have to fulfil their needs and ambitions, have the correct content and be structured in a way which suits them. It will also need to provide

adequate and appropriate progression routes for students. An ongoing dialogue with companies is required to achieve this. Companies will not fund activities they cannot see the need for, or the point of, or benefiting the economy in general. Very few employers who engaged with the Negotiated Learning Framework project understood or saw the need for academic credits, and in some cases formal qualifications. HEIs need to take steps to inform and educate business partners about the potential for HE credit to value, describe, measure and recognise all learning. Employers more readily acknowledge the point of having skills 'fit for purpose', but the added benefits of HE or the world of education often require further explanation; HEIs should be offering the development of intellectual and personal skills together with specific knowledge in key areas, not 'training'. This process of discussion often took months, even years in some cases, with employers requiring a good deal of explanation, persuasion and relationship building before they wanted to commit themselves to working with us. Part of this discussion should focus on the benefits the company will gain from having a better skilled workforce and these include more innovative working practices, hopefully leading to increased productivity.

Lord Leitch wants to accelerate the UK into the top eight most productive countries in the world, and proposes to do this by increasing qualification levels over the next twelve years. There is undoubtedly a link between qualified staff and increased productivity, but it is not the only link, and it under-sells the experience of the individual and the APL process, where learning from previous experience and qualifications is evidenced to gain advanced standing onto an award. As previously mentioned, this process is used extensively on Teesside's work-based studies programme. There needs to be a balance of emphasis between 'qualification' and 'experience', as gaining a qualification does not automatically make you capable of undertaking specific activities and a certificate cannot bestow experience (unless written into the curriculum). An individual who is holding a twenty year old degree, but has never practised the skills they learned whilst studying, nor kept them up to date, cannot be more use to the workforce than an individual who has no qualifications but has worked in that sector at increasingly sophisticated levels for those same twenty years. However, ironically, the first person

would already be a success, when measured against the 2020 40 per cent target, whilst the second person, who may potentially be much more highly skilled and useful in the work-place would be seen to require a qualification. If the focus is to be upon new study then ultimately what providers offer needs to continuously evolve to facilitate the relevance and rigour of this new study. Programmes, courses and modules need to be more holistic with a remit to improve the many facets of a student; it is also vital to include the acknowledgement and validation of skills, knowledge, experience, work-practice, etc.

## **Conclusion**

Learning undoubtedly enhances skills and builds a better focused and more productive workforce, but as HEIs diversify and continue to attract differing groups of individuals to HE they need to remember that learning also transforms and improves lives. Innovation and enterprise need to be entwined with the acquisition of skills as it is only through the linking of these that the UK workforce will fulfil their potential. Through competence comes confidence and having a population that believes in their ability, capability and the value of their ideas seems at least to be an equally valid motivation to that of making the country more economically viable; hopefully the two are inextricably linked and the creative and analytical skills long associated with a higher education will continue to be prioritised, fostered

and valued in order to support this union. Creative, daring, risk-taking individuals may seem disruptive but it is only through the catalyst of their ideas that anything new happens.

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