

Working with Employers: Making Partnership a Reality

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Working in partnership with employers has been identified as one of the defining elements of a Foundation Degree. It is, however, an area that is seen as particularly challenging by many existing and potential providers in the HE and FE sectors. This article aims to provide a brief review of our experiences on the Community Governance and Public Sector Management Degree at the University of Huddersfield and identifies what we believe to be the core elements of the approach that we have implemented.

To provide some context, our Foundation Degree began delivery in October 2002. It is offered on a part-time basis and is aimed at students working in the local government and voluntary sector. Currently over 50 students are enrolled on the programme and they are drawn from five local authorities within our region (Calderdale, Doncaster, Kirklees, Rotherham and Wakefield). In addition, we are currently in dialogue with a further four authorities who are interested in participating in the degree.

The degree aims to provide learners with the skills and knowledge that they require to work within what has become the constantly changing local governance and public services sector. As with all Foundation Degrees, this is achieved through a combination of knowledge-based modules, work-based learning and core skills delivery. We believe that to achieve this and maintain the currency and authenticity of the curriculum, close working with employers from the sector is essential.

The key organisational structure through which this collaboration is achieved is our Development Group. This consists of

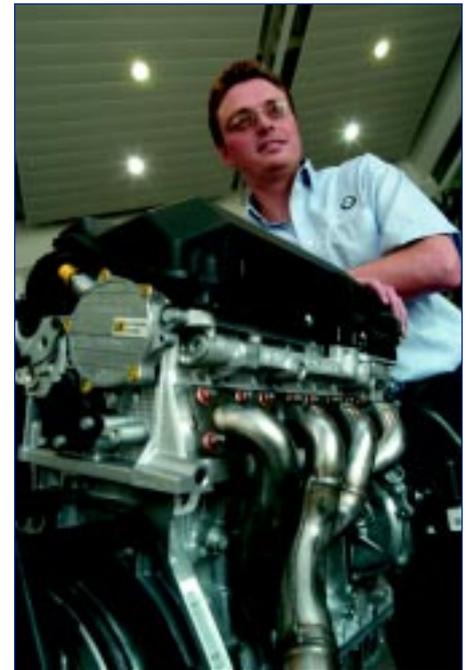
academics from the University, tutors from the FE colleges supporting delivery and a representative from each of our employer partner organisations. The Group meets regularly and has a wide remit of responsibilities. These include:

- Reviewing the content of the curriculum, in terms of both individual modules and overall programme objectives and outcomes.
- Participating in quality assurance procedures, such as reviewing student evaluations and pathway reports.
- Advising on marketing and recruitment, with additional support from individual employers in putting these recommendations into action.

However, while the Development Group provides the necessary organisational infrastructure for our interactions with employers, we believe that underlying it is a more fundamental ethos that provides a firm foundation for our partnership. We believe that this can be summed up in four elements:

We Demonstrate our Commitment to Partnership. This means that we are willing to invest our time and resources in working with employers for the success of the degree. In this, we are supported by the senior management of our institution who have made it clear that Foundation Degrees are not 'second best' qualifications, but will play a vital role in achieving our mission of increasing access to high quality higher education that meets the needs of our region.

We Share Ownership of the Degree. We do not see the degree as simply the property of the University, but of all the



partners. We demonstrate this by always being willing to travel to meet the employers on their own premises, regardless of whether we are going to meet a Chief Executive, a middle manager or a student's line manager. We also acknowledge that we are not the only experts and that our employer partners have a great deal of experience in both knowledge of the sector and the provision of adult education. We respect this and are keen to learn from them.

We Change our Practice to Meet Their Needs. We recognise that in the past, higher education has often been structured to meet the needs of the producer rather than those of learners. We have adopted a 'can-do' approach in which we are ready to challenge and re-think our traditional ways of working to meet the needs of our students and employer partners. An example of this is that we have changed the timing of our recruitment to fit in with the staff appraisal cycles of our partners. As a result of this,

we have recently taken a cohort of students who will study through an academic year running from February to November. In this way, what we do is driven by the needs of our partners.

We Make Their Lives Easier. We recognise that participation in the degree has a cost for employers and, that to be sustainable, the partnership must offer benefits to them. Through our joint design of the curriculum, we have together developed a degree that is aimed at meeting the specific training and development needs identified by employers in our sector. In addition, we are also working with employers to match the core skills that are delivered to the employer and management competency frameworks that they have adopted. In each of these ways, we aim to offer a programme of learning that delivers for both employer and student.

We believe that the value of this ethos and the partnership working that it supports are reflected in the outcomes that we are achieving with our programme. These include the following:

Widening Participation. The degree has shown the potential to contribute to our University's aim of widening participation and to the government's objective of raising participation in higher education. Evidence demonstrates that many of the students now undertaking the degree would not be able to access higher education were it not for the particular features of this degree. These include the active support of employers in marketing the programme and supporting students in their studies.

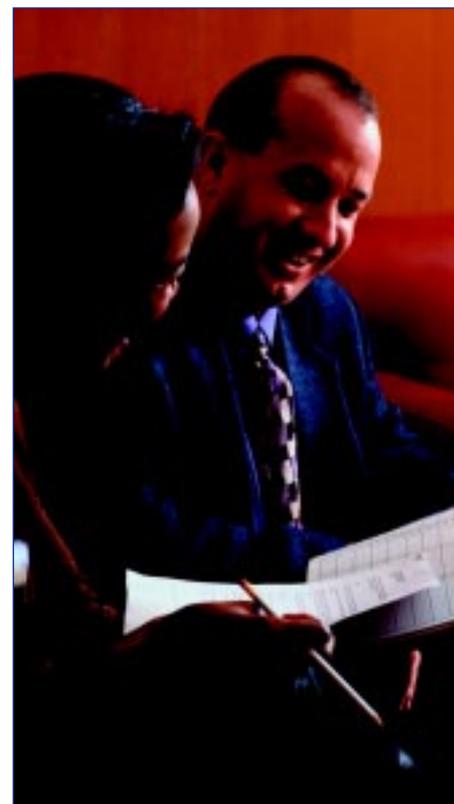
Good Rates of Retention and Completion. It is sometimes suggested that success in widening participation can lead to problems in retention – 'you may be able to recruit them, but you can't always keep them'. This has not been the case on our Foundation Degree where we have achieved retention and

completion rates of in excess of 90 percent. We believe the relationship that we have built with employers is a key contributory factor in this success. Students feel that they are studying a robust curriculum that has direct relevance to their work-place. In addition, students receive a co-ordinated package of support which combines a pro-active personal tutor system with work-place mentoring and liaison with line managers.

Student Experience. Evaluation has shown very high levels of student satisfaction with the programme as a whole, with particularly good responses to some of the more innovatory areas such as our distance learning packages and student support systems. These high levels of satisfaction are also reflected in the qualitative feedback from students who show high levels of personal investment in the degree and who express greater engagement with issues within their workplace.

We believe that these outcomes demonstrate that working with employers is not simply an end in itself, but has proved to be a process that can make a vital contribution towards meeting the goals of the government and the needs of students.

I would like to finish off by turning to the future. I believe that to sustain our current success we cannot stand still and as the needs of our learners and our employer partners change, we must change with them. Currently we are working with our partners on an innovative approach to skills provision that will link the individual learning outcomes of a student to the developmental needs identified in their annual staff appraisal. This further extends the scope for employers to shape the curriculum and introduces opportunities for them to become involved in the delivery of materials to students. It is through such innovations that we are confident we can continue to deliver to students.



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