

Committing to Vocational Educational Development: Making the Pledge.

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Abstract.

The development of management and workforce skills are increasingly valued as the key to economic success (CEC 2000; Leitch 2006; CMI 2009; UKCES 2009), however despite a succession of government white papers, numerous initiatives to incentivise employers and individuals, and substantial government funding, the goal of a highly skilled UK workforce remains stubbornly elusive. Central to the success of the government's goal for a highly skilled UK workforce, is the commitment of employees to their own development but whilst employers are given financial encouragement to make a 'Pledge' to development, the challenge of gaining the commitment of employees, though fundamental, receives little attention in the Government's Plan (DIUS 2007, 53).

Commitment is now acknowledged to be a multi-dimensional and complex construct which may be directed to multiple targets or foci but it may also have different 'bases' which Becker refers to as 'the motives engendering attachment' (Becker 1992, 232). Meyer and Allen's (1991) three component framework of commitment, incorporating affective, continuance, and normative bases, has become the 'dominant' model in the management literature (Solinger, Van Olffen and Roe 2006, 70). Having tested the relevance of these bases with both organisational and occupational commitment, Meyer et al suggest that they appear to be 'generalizable across domains' and recommend 'research directed at further extensions of the model' (1993, 20).

In this paper, the concept of development commitment, a new and relatively unexplored focus, is explored from an interpretivist perspective in a higher vocational educational context. The objective is to develop a conceptual model of commitment in this context and to assess whether the emerging concept is compatible with existing models depicting multiple components of commitment. Following an initial pilot study involving interviews and focus groups, twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted during the spring and summer of 2009. Using an 'extreme case sampling' approach (Saunders, Thornhill and Lewis 2009, 239) the population selected for interview were the part-time students who were enrolled on several cohorts of an award winning Foundation Degree in Leadership and Management during the 2007-8 and 2008-9 academic years.

The concept of development commitment which emerges encapsulates two dimensions, a binding dimension and a sacrificial dimension restricting freedom of action, a perspective consistent with Angle and Perry's (1981) first division of commitment into two subscales (continuance and effort). Indeed this study further supports their conclusion that these two dimensions vary independently. Accepting the dominant view that commitment is an attitude (Buchanan 1974; Angle and Perry 1981; Mowday, Steers and Porter 1982; O'Reilly and Chatman 1986; Allen and Meyer 1990; Solinger, Thornhill and Lewis 2006) one of the key findings is that development commitment having a behavioural focus, is distinctly different from commitment to an entity in that there can be no passive form.

The findings have been evaluated against existing models and inform the formulation of an original conceptual model which incorporates constructs from applied psychology and offers new avenues of enquiry for future research. Whilst development commitment is

conceived as multi-dimensional, the study reveals four components: affective, calculative, normative and a fourth self-evaluative component.

Critically, this study found that in the context of higher vocational educational development, certain combinations of contextual conditions may inhibit the employees' decision to make a commitment irrespective of their desire to progress and despite having a keen awareness of the 'links between getting economically valuable skills and getting good jobs' (DIUS 2007, 10). Government assumptions that such knowledge will engender development commitment are therefore questionable.

Keywords

commitment; development; higher education; leadership; skill

Introduction.

This paper examines the nature of employee commitment to higher vocational educational development from the perspective of the participating employee. The Leitch Review of Skills highlighted the importance of skills development to the UK economy viewing them as 'the key lever for prosperity and fairness' (2006, 57) and higher level skills particularly as 'crucial for world-class management and leadership' (66). His recommendations identified the need for a partnership between government, employers and employees, as he advised broadening the appeal of higher level qualifications beyond the 'current sole focus on young people' and 'beyond the traditional three year honours degrees' (2006, 98). The suggestion therefore was to develop leadership and management skills through employer-led foundation degrees populated with mature students from within the current workforce.

Essential to the success of the present Government's plan to meet the challenges laid down by the Leitch Review, is the resilience of their respective commitment to skills development. The Government has been keen to 'increase employers' commitment to training' and 'to ensure that people were more committed to develop their skills through their working lives' (Cannell 2007, 1). However under the current Government Plan, whilst employers are encouraged to commit through a financially induced 'pledge', the employees' commitment to development is assumed to flow from realising the links between getting economically valuable skills and getting good jobs (DIUS 2007). Given the inherent conflict in the employment relationship, the orthodoxy of mutuality which is core to the Government's proposals can be questioned both conceptually and empirically. Further, our understanding of commitment in the workplace is that it is a multi-dimensional and complex construct (Iles Mabey and Robertson 1990) which cannot always be explained by an instrumental or economic imperative. It is therefore unwise to assume that employees will automatically offer their commitment to their own development. Indeed the latest international skills data suggests there is 'little changed from that reported in the Leitch Review' (UKCES 2009, 5) and that we continue to have the lowest percentage of managers educated to degree level.

In a report for the Council for Workforce Development, Connor asserts that 'the workforce development market for higher education is much more complex and also more diverse than the traditional student market (2007, 1) with learners presenting with a range of prior learning experiences, needs and aspirations. As the success of the Government's strategy is dependent upon a 'partnership' between Government, employers and individuals, and the resilience of their respective commitment to development, it is argued that a greater

understanding of development commitment from the perspective of the employee has never been more crucial. 'We need to hear more from situated individuals' about 'what actions they take, why and with what desired outcomes' (Mallon and Walton 2005, 470).

It is unclear whether any of the existing multi-dimensional models of commitment which identify component mindsets, can be applied to a 'development' focus, the models having not been extended to this domain to date. This study addresses this gap in the literature and aims to explore the concept of development commitment in a higher vocational education context from the perspective of the participating employee. The research objectives are to develop a conceptual model of commitment in this context and to examine whether the emerging concept is compatible with existing academic models depicting multiple components in order to ascertain whether the associated knowledge base can be successfully transferred.

The aim and objectives were operationalised through two research questions:

- 1) How do employees engaged in higher education experience commitment to that activity?
- 2) How do these employees explain the reasons for their decisions to make a commitment to development?

Commitment: a complex and multi-dimensional concept.

It is important in the context of this study to recognise that commitment and motivation are related but distinguishable concepts. The Oxford English Dictionary defines motivation as the stimulation of interest, whereas commitment is engagement that restricts freedom of action (OED 1975). In the context of work, the concept of motivation is 'a set of energetic forces that originates both within as well as beyond an individual's being, to initiate work-related behaviour, and to determine its form, direction, intensity and duration' (Pinder 1998, 11). Commitment in contrast, has been defined as a 'force that binds an individual to a course of action' (Meyer and Herscovitch 2001, 301). Meyer, Becker and Vandenberghe suggest that motivation differs from commitment, in that whilst both serve to influence behaviour, the latter 'binds an individual to a course of action' (2004, 994) and is generally of a more long-term nature. In relationship marketing, commitment has a similar sense of durability, defined by Gounaris (2005, 127) as 'the desire for continuity manifested by the willingness to invest resources'. Consequently commitment may lead to persistence in a particular course of action even when motivation is temporarily low. Brown agrees, noting that commitment is 'an obliging force which requires that the person honor [sic] the commitment, even in the face of fluctuating attitudes and whims' (1996, 241).

The prevalent scholarly view is that commitment is an attitude (Buchanan, 1974; Mowday, Steers and Porter 1979; Angle and Perry 1981; O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986; Allen and Meyer 1990; Solinger, Van Olffen and Roe 2006) and as such is 'a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor' [sic] (Eagly and Chaiken 1993). According to this doctrine, the psychological tendency develops on the basis of evaluative responding made with respect to an attitude object, which may be concrete (as in the case of an organisation), abstract (as with a philosophical or political belief), or behavioural (for example a commitment to development), and results in supportive behaviours.

A review of this rapidly expanding literature reveals that commitment is not a unitary or unambiguous concept; that multiple commitments exist is now well accepted (Snape, Chan and Redman 2006). A significant section of the early commitment literature was focussed on achieving allegiance to the employing organisation (Hrebiniak and Alutto 1972; Buchanan 1974; Mowday, Steers and Porter 1979) but even as far back as 1983, Morrow had identified more than 25 interpretations or measures of commitment that were evident in the management literature. These variants could be categorised into 6 different areas of focus: commitment to the organisation; to one's career; to the job; to a team; to a union; or a commitment to work for its own intrinsic value, a form of 'protestant work ethic' (Blood 1969; Mirels and Garrett 1971). Additional foci of commitment (such as professional commitment) continue to be identified (Hall, Smith and Langfield-Smith 2005). Commitment may thus be directed to multiple targets or foci but it may also have different 'bases' which Becker refers to as 'the motives engendering attachment (1992, 232).

In 1981, Angle and Perry were the first to break down commitment into two subscales: a continuance commitment based on a desire to stay, and a value commitment reflecting a willingness to exert effort. Five years later, in 1986, O'Reilly and Chatman applied Kelman's (1958) three-dimensional taxonomy of attitude change to the concept of organisational commitment. Commitment, they argued, is a form of psychological bond or attachment which could be based on compliance with, identification with, or full internalization of, the organisation's values and goals. 'Compliance' is described as a calculated form of attachment anticipating some form of extrinsic reward in return; 'identification' is founded on a desire for affiliation or to maintain a relationship with the organisation; and 'internalisation' represents a true affinity between individual and organisational values. They were able to demonstrate that an individual's commitment may reflect varying combinations of the three dimensions and that critically, the behavioural consequences of each would vary considerably. Indeed compliance commitment was actually found to be negatively correlated with both turnover intention and turnover, the reverse of the relationship with the other two dimensions.

In 1991, Meyer and Allen presented another three component model of commitment, incorporating affective, continuance, and normative bases. 'Affective' commitment was the term used to describe an emotional attachment to the organisation; 'continuance' commitment was a form of attachment which recognises the costs associated with leaving the organisation; and 'normative' commitment referred to a feeling of obligation to the organisation. Meyer and Allen, in agreement with O'Reilly and Chatman (1986), viewed the categories as components rather than types of commitment, acknowledging that an individual's commitment could well reflect elements of all three. They refer to the components or bases as, 'mindsets' all of which underpin commitment and have the potential to produce the same behavioural outcomes.

Other multi-dimensional models with associated scales of measurement have been developed in an attempt to seek greater predictability over behavioural outcomes. Penley and Gould (1988) built on the work of O'Reilly and Chatman two years earlier and proposed the three dimensions to be 'moral' – acceptance and identification with organisational goals; 'calculative' - based on the receipt of inducements, and 'alienative' - based on environmental pressures. In 1993, Jaros et al presented a modification to the Meyer and Allen framework, rejecting the 'normative' category and retaining 'continuance', but apparently dividing affective into two: 'affective' and 'moral'. However over the last twenty years, the Meyer

and Allen multi-component conceptualisation has emerged as ‘dominant model in organizational commitment research’ (Solinger, Van Olffen and Roe 2008, 70).

Subsequent research by Meyer, Allen and Smith tested the relevance of affective, continuance and normative bases with both organisational and occupational commitment and concluded that the bases appear to be ‘generalizable across domains’ and recommended that future research be ‘directed at further extensions of the model’ to other focal targets (1993, 20). Meyer and Herscovitch (2001, 317) introduced a visual representation of the general model and argued that the focus could be an entity (e.g. organization, union) or the outcome of a behaviour (e.g. development).

Development commitment represents a relatively new and under-explored focus to the commitment literature, although the concept has some albeit limited history. In a study involving over 700 personnel, Lahteenmaki and Paalumaki (1993) found evidence of a commitment to personal and professional development which they were able to differentiate from career commitment. In this work, development commitment was presented as a personal ‘value’ which is manifest in a ‘desire to fulfil oneself or to develop professionally and to feel achievement’ (1993, 388). They found that strong career commitment was related to personal mobility motivation, whereas a development commitment was related to a motivation to *retrain* (added emphasis). However few studies since have pursued the concept of ‘development commitment’ though related discussions appear in the motivation literature.

Motivation to learn was described by Noe (1986, 743) as ‘the specific desire of the trainee to learn the context of the training programme’ and by Carlson et al (2000, 271) as the ‘desire to engage in training activities and fully embrace the training experience’. Training motivation studies (Noe and Schmitt 1986, Noe and Wilk 1993, Klein, Noe and Wang 2006, Major, Turner and Fletcher 2006) have typically assessed motivation to learn using measures focussed on the attitude to job-related training experiences e.g. ‘I try to learn as much as I can from training programmes’ (Noe and Wilk 1993, 298); ‘I am willing to exert considerable effort in training programmes in order to improve my skills’ (Major, Turner and Fletcher 2006, 930). Naquin and Holton have argued that the use of the concepts ‘motivation to learn’ or ‘motivation to train’ are inadequate and suggested a new motivational construct, a ‘motivation to improve work through learning’ (Naquin and Holton 2003, 356). However their construct assesses a combination of an individual’s motivation to train and motivation to transfer knowledge rather than capturing the concept of a life-long and sustained commitment to development. It is argued here that a sustained pursuit of personal development should be considered a commitment rather than merely a motivation to learn. For example, a (committed) university student may ‘stick’ to a degree course in the face of significant competing pressures and through fluctuating day-to-day levels of motivation to learn.

Recently Tsai et al (2007) published research which examined the impact of job satisfaction on employees’ learning commitment in the context of a recently downsized organisation. Following a brief account of the Meyer et al dominant model of commitment, they state, ‘very little literature’ could be found on learning commitment (Tsai et al 2007, 161). Deciding to treat learning commitment as a factor similar to organisational commitment, they produced a questionnaire which utilised 5 questions to produce a measure which they then correlate with job satisfaction. However the elements of this measure concerned the ‘willingness to learn new knowledge and skills’ (162) with one question assessing the respondent’s view of the importance of continuous learning. The concept of the

individual making binding force or a personal willingness to exert effort was absent from the measure.

Research methods.

In contrast to the dominant epistemology in commitment research, the current study followed an interpretivist perspective based on a grounded theory approach and qualitative methodology. The conclusions of a pilot study involving individual interviews and focus group interviews were that the latter revealed some evidence of a group pressure to conform to an idealised model of a 'committed' trainee, possibly augmenting the inherent pressure created by the occupation of the researcher (senior academic from the educational institution). It appeared that the privacy of the one-to-one dialogue of the interview developed a stronger rapport between researcher and respondent which facilitated the building of a level of trust.

Adopting purposive sampling, twenty interviews were carried out with employees who had committed to a 2 year employer-designed FdA in Leadership and Management in the northeast of England. Respondents were from several different cohorts and had enrolled at various times during two consecutive academic years. Following guidance on sampling from Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006, 76), the sample size was initially twelve interviews. From the first level of analysis of these interviews, certain themes were emerging in the data and it was apparent that the majority of respondents had been encouraged to participate by what was clearly a very supportive employer. It was decided to increase the number of interviews to extend or at least enrich the range of categories and a further eight interviews from subsequent cohorts were added to the sample and interviewing continued during the months of May, June and July 2009. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality.

Findings.

Notwithstanding the existence of certain pressures in their environment, all respondents confirmed their personal desire to embark on to the programme and were able to articulate their reasons for the decision. The implicit assumption that commitment involves human free will is at the core of the very concept of being committed; however the commitment literature has diminished this important feature with its definitions of binding force, etc.

Commitment to higher vocational education development was perceived as inherently involving restriction of freedom or sacrifice. One quote illustrates the widely held perception:

“My life was completely taken over, but not at any point did I think, I’m not going to do this, so I think I probably had quite a high level of commitment.”

Another respondent’s comments revealed that the level of commitment was perceived as being directly related to the amount of personal sacrifice:

“I didn’t want to give lots of additional time because I had thought about doing a certificate or a diploma in management before, but they’ve always been evening classes; well at the end of the day, it’s quite a big commitment to do that, so the fact that it was supported through work was one of the added advantages.”

This portrayal of commitment differs in emphasis from the Meyer & Herscovitch definition but is consistent with the classic lay dictionary definition depicting commitment as ‘engagement that restricts freedom of action’ (OED 1975). The sacrificial or restrictive characteristic of development commitment was commonly referred to by respondents,

frequently as an inhibiting feature, an initial deterrent to commit which had to be overcome. However for some, the personal sacrifice had its own attraction:

“I want to do it so that the work that I’m doing is my own because then I can say at the end, ‘this is my qualification and I’ve done it, on my own time, while I’m studying and it’s all my own work”.

Irrespective of whether it was perceived as a positive or negative feature, the strength of the participants’ views on the sacrifices involved, highlights what is potentially a substantive difference between commitment to behaviours and commitment to entities. Commitment to behaviour necessarily involves the exertion of effort, which although variable in its extent or strength, differentiates the committed individual from those not committed to the behaviour. Therefore it does not merely restrict freedom of action, it requires action.

In contrast, it is argued that commitment to an entity such as the employing organisation or a union, may result in discretionary effort but may conversely lead to inertia or apathy. Consider the employee ‘committed’ to the employing organisation as a consequence of the lack of available employment alternatives, or feeling ‘tied’ by the expectation of an excellent pension. One can imagine that such ‘compliant’ or ‘instrumental’ commitment to the organisation is unlikely to inspire discretionary effort in favour of the target entity and demands little in terms of sacrifice. There is evidence to support this assumption. In a recent meta-analytical study, continuance commitment was found either to have no relationship or even a negative relationship with organisationally relevant behaviours such as attendance, performance and organisational citizenship (Meyer et al 2002).

The findings were consistent with the basic premise of those existing academic models which depict multiple bases of commitment, though the data here suggest that the current typologies are not wholly appropriate in the higher vocational education development context. First the study found a parallel mindset for an affective base of commitment; an emotional attachment centred on a love for learning, enquiry and challenge for its own intrinsic value. One respondent reflected:

“I do enjoy meeting other people, personal challenges, personal development and sort of trying to keep up to date with things”.

Similarly there were parallels both for a calculative or instrumental base of commitment centred on the expectation of career advancement or greater employability, and somewhat unexpectedly, for a normative base manifested as a sense of obligation or responsibility. Obligation could result from an internally felt sense of indebtedness to the employer or it could develop from a sense of responsibility arising from the job role, where the employee felt they had to act as a role model for colleagues or subordinates.

In addition the study revealed a further base: a self-evaluative base including self-esteem and self-efficacy elements, which is ostensibly absent from the dominant and other existing multi-component models. The importance of self-esteem and self-efficacy has long been recognised as influencing both performance and goal-setting behaviours, though the exact nature of the relationship has been questioned (Vancouver, Thompson and Williams 2001; Vancouver et al 2002; Bandura and Locke 2003; Vancouver and Kendall 2006). However what is novel in this study is not only that self-evaluation can impact on goal-setting; but that the desire to enhance it can in itself become the prime goal of development

commitment. It is the reason for the decision to commit and remain committed. For example one respondent explained her underlying reasons for her commitment:

“It was just to make **me** feel better about myself”.

Another stated:

“I wanted to prove to myself, although I’d been out of full time education for a while, I still had the ability to study and develop knowledge I really wanted to prove to myself that yes, I was capable of actually getting something higher than ‘A’ levels”.

The identification of a fourth self-evaluative component is an addition which enables the integration of knowledge gained from another literature base to enrich our understanding of development commitment and enhance current practices aimed to improve the nation’s skills. Critically this study found that certain combinations of contextual conditions and mindsets may inhibit the employees’ decision to make a commitment to development despite having a keen awareness of the ‘links between getting economically valuable skills and getting good jobs’ (DIUS 2007, 10) and irrespective of their strong desire to progress. Previous negative experiences of education, more common with mature entry students, can reduce self-esteem and self-efficacy, and leads many to discount development opportunities involving assessment to avoid risking further humiliation.

Understanding how to challenge these perceptions will enable those responsible for making and implementing skills development policy to be more effective. Programmes targeted to attract mature and under-qualified employees to gain qualifications can be designed to maximise opportunities for raising self-esteem. For example the realisation that familiarity with the content of training or development and positive early feedback on performance will impact positively on self-efficacy (Tai 2006) throws doubt on the wisdom of widespread APEL practices for the mature-entry undergraduate student. APEL reduces the potential for early positive feedback to improve self-efficacy, deemed necessary to maximise learning and persistence (Gist and Mitchell 1992).

Alternatively, failure to succeed at school or college may result in a negative evaluation of education rather than, or in addition to low self-esteem. Such perceptions of higher education need to be challenged with a concerted effort by employers and Government agencies. Politicians’ references to some new vocationally based qualifications as ‘Mickey Mouse courses’ (Margaret Hodge: 13th January 2003) are not helpful and also arguably not deserved. Conversely traditional degree subjects are frequently criticised by those without qualifications as being too academic, inaccessible, and irrelevant to the real world. As Brockes stated in an article in *The Guardian* on 15th January 2003, ‘paradoxically, it is the very vocational degrees which Hodge is urging students to go in for, which, in the wider world, are most likely to be ridiculed as doss-subjects’.

Whether earlier educational failure is internally or externally attributed or both, there are similar behavioural outcomes. Certainly low achievement at school has been identified as the primary cause for low participation rates in higher education (National Audit Office 2008).

Discussion.

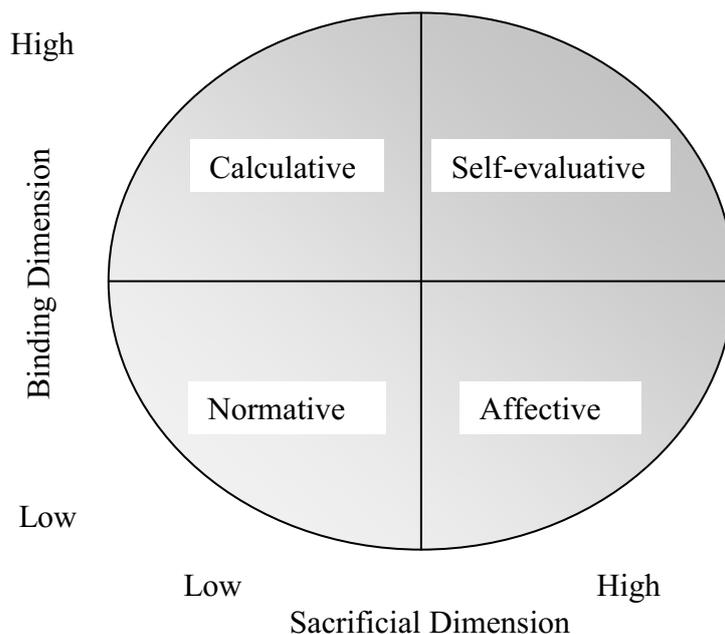
The concept of commitment to higher vocational education development which emerged encapsulates two dimensions, a binding dimension and a sacrificial dimension

restricting freedom of action, a perspective consistent with Angle and Perry’s (1981) first division of commitment into two subscales (continuance and effort). Indeed this study further supports their conclusion that these two dimensions vary independently. Accepting the dominant view that commitment is attitudinal (Buchanan 1974; Steers and Porter 1979; Angle and Perry 1981; Mowday, O’Reilly and Chatman 1986; Allen and Meyer 1990; Solinger, Van Olffen and Roe 2006), it is argued that development commitment in having a behavioural focus is distinctly different from commitment to an entity in that there can be no passive form. To this extent the findings of this study of development commitment are therefore not consistent with the view proposed by Meyer and Herscovitch that considers it is ‘largely a function of emphasis’ whether the focus of commitment is towards entities or behaviours (2001, 309).

Taking note that commitment to development is a voluntary decision, that it involves sacrifice and that there is no passive form, has implications for our understanding of the phenomenon and the pressures which may explain its common absence. It is therefore concluded that development commitment is best defined as *a personal voluntary decision binding an individual to pro-development behaviours and restricting freedom of action.*

This study supports the basic premise of existing academic models which depict multiple forms of commitment; although the data here suggest that the current typologies are not entirely appropriate in the development context. Using the language of the multi-dimensional commitment literature, the components of development commitment emerging from this study are affective, calculative, normative and self-evaluative. The two dimensions and the four mindsets have informed the formulation of an original conceptual model (Figure 1). The position of each mindset illustrates the relative importance of each dimension conceptually and is not intended to reflect the strength of commitment or to suggest that components do not co-exist.

Figure 1.
Bases of commitment to higher vocational education development.



The study confirms that the belief that commitment to self-development will ensue from the knowledge of beneficial links between education and career, is overly optimistic, particularly in the context of higher level qualification. Based on an assumed calculative mindset, this belief has arguably perpetuated the complacency which has historically been associated with training and development in the UK (Coopers and Lybrand 1985).

Limitations of the research and implications for future research.

The study is unusual in extending the concept of commitment to a new domain – development, and the exploratory nature of the research provides insight to a construct within a field historically dominated by quantitative methodologies (Karami, Rowley and Analoui 2006). However the adoption of a qualitative methodology and the size and nature of the sample indicate caution in generalising the findings.

This research was located in the context of accredited development leading to higher level qualification which was expected to extend and possibly also intensify the range of needs underlying the commitment. Whilst useful in exposing multiple components, extension of the conclusions of the study beyond this context would not be appropriate without further research in the field.

One potential source of error was the tendency for participants to conform to some ‘idealised’ image of the diligent employee or student. The researcher’s profession may have added to this effect. Future research undertaken by someone unconnected with either the employing organisation or the educational establishment would be useful to test whether the researcher’s profession had any impact on the emergent model.

The research was located in an interpretivist paradigm and is therefore subject to the criticisms inherent in this approach. Testing of the emergent model using a quantitative method may compensate for the lack of generalisability. Further, a mixed methods approach would facilitate ‘across methods triangulation’ (Jick 1979, 602). However the emergence of a self-evaluative component of development commitment is unlikely to have resulted from a survey method with its inherent tendency to produce socially desirable responses (Phillips 1973). Self-efficacy needs were frequently only revealed once trust had been established at a mature stage in the interview. Respondents may have been reluctant to identify what may have been judged as a ‘shallow’ rationale for undertaking the programme or they may have preferred to conceal what they have perceived to be a personal weakness. Often painful memories had contributed to this ‘secret’ and whilst the anonymous questionnaire offers a level of protection against revealing oneself in this way, it cannot duplicate the essentially constructivist nature of some of the interviews (Conger 1998). Consequently whilst the study provides the groundwork to generate possible hypotheses for future research to investigate, the ability of a survey to replicate these findings is questionable.

So how can further research test and/or extend these findings? The research suggested that ‘ghosts’ (Rothenberg 1994, 70) from the past contributed to low self-efficacy but for these respondents it also produced a strong need for change. Research conducted elsewhere (Vancouver Thompson and Williams 2001; Vancouver et al 2002; Vancouver & Kendall 2006) would suggest that this is not an unusual reaction but neither is it typical (Bandura and Locke 2003), but where this study adds to this debate, is to recognise that not only can self-efficacy impact on goal setting (positively or negatively), but that raising learning self-efficacy can itself become the goal. What is not fully understood is whether the goal of raising learning self-efficacy is widely experienced amongst those with a below average self-

evaluation and resisted until the contextual conditions combine to enable a development commitment to be made. If true, then the implications national and organisational policy would be immense. However if such goal-setting was an exceptional response, then the role of government and organisations in creating and sustaining enabling contextual conditions, whilst still of value, would be limited in scope.

To pursue this line of inquiry qualitative methods are recommended to examine the relationship between the learning self-efficacy of employees and their response to opportunities to commit to accredited development opportunities, working in partnership with an employer to begin the research in the development phase of the target programme. Although such opportunities arise relatively infrequently, academics are ideally placed to recognise when and where they occur. Increasing our understanding of the impact of low learning self-efficacy on decisions to commit to development opportunities, particularly accredited (assessed) development will enable us to assess the potential to enhance the nation's skills in line with Government ambition.

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