
HEA Academy support for employer engagement (EE)

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Abstract

The Leitch Report, published in Dec 2006, highlighted global economic competition and its impact, driving the UK to seek to be an economy based upon higher level knowledge and skills. It showed that the UK lagged behind many other western economies in the achievement of basic and intermediate skills, so that there is a considerable deficit to be filled before enough of the population are even ready to embark upon higher level skills. Leitch set challenging targets for getting 40% of the population qualified to level four by 2020, and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) have increased that target to 45%.

For the academic years 2006/7, 2007/8, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) identified Employer Engagement as a priority theme, and it is one of seven in its Strategic Plan for 2008/9. This paper gives a brief overview of the HEA employer engagement (EE) focus.

Introduction

The view that the Treasury should concentrate on funding achievement at level two, and to some extent at level three, with employers and individuals paying largely for level four, has led the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) to move towards 'co-funding' (HEFCE, viewed 2008). As such, a new funding regime has been established that expects employers to contribute up to half of the full cost (not just the fee) of education for their employees (though this can be partly in kind).

The Government strategy sees HE as needing to take on board more engagement of employers in designing the curriculum, delivering parts of it, and perhaps even contributing to assessment where appropriate. These challenges may be particularly acute for subjects like GEES, where obvious vocational routes are sometimes not so apparent.

Similarly, the Sainsbury Report (HM Treasury, viewed 2008) of 2007 emphasised the importance of an economic return from investment in university research, and encouraged a more business-facing role for all Higher Education Institutions (HEI). HEFCE are currently funding around 25 Employer Engagement pilots for institutions who see this role

as central to their future missions.

Simultaneously, we should be aware of the serious demographic downturn in the 18 year-old population over the next decade, meaning that 70% of the workforce for 2020 is already in the workplace. The recent Universities UK (UUK) forecasts for HE show that considerable effort will need to be put into generating new markets if we are to keep the university sector healthy.

HEA employer engagement focus

For these reasons, the HEA have chosen to put its main emphasis upon the innovative and challenging activity of supporting and developing existing employees, and not just improving the employability of our traditional full-time students.

People at work have been shown repeatedly to favour shorter and more flexible qualifications, in terms of both relevant curriculum content and learning processes that allow for choice of time and place of study. They also appreciate opportunities to earn credit for previous experience and to accumulate that credit over time. This style of learning poses challenges to HEIs for curriculum, pedagogy, staff flexibility and virtually all institutional systems and processes—although the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (QAA, viewed 2008) has recently revised Section 9 of their Code of Practice on work-based and placement learning to help clarify to institutions how standards can be maintained.

However, the good news is that HEIs are responding vigorously and creatively, with many innovative projects, initiatives, and consortia. It appears to be part of the strategy to 'let a thousand flowers bloom' initially, and then to 'cultivate and clone the strongest plants'.

The HEA were given two tranches of special funding by HEFCE to support EE. During 2006/7, we spent much of our time helping the sector to understand the implications of the Leitch Report, and individual institutions to position themselves appropriately, in accordance with their stated missions. We established three critical networks:

- a PVC Special Interest Group to address, in particular, strategy and institutional systems and processes
- an Exchange Group of around 14 HEIs in the vanguard of EE developments, who have exchanged their own practice, but also encapsulated it within an HEA publication to help the sector at large
- a research forum, to map the existing relevant studies, to identify gaps and to take up new commissions, and to build more evidence-based practice

The HEA worked with national policy and strategy agencies, on both the HE and the employer perspectives, to seek to create more 'joined up' support for HEIs, and delivered two national conferences and many more local seminars during our first year.

Of particular interest to the present readership might be the projects (HEA, viewed 2008), which some of the Academy's Subject Centres (SC) conducted with their counterpart Sector Skills Councils. Around a dozen SCs pursued projects as diverse as:

- working in partnership with Sector Skills Councils (SSCs)
- creating integrated qualification frameworks
- mapping Subject Benchmarks against National Occupational Standards
- supporting the development of National Skills Academies
- designing curricula to match needs in the Sector Skills Agreements
- supporting the design of 14-19 Diplomas
- studying careers destinations, and skills from HE in contextual use.

The HEA's Facilitation Group for EE (a cross Subject Centre body) is now working with core funding only, but encouraging SCs to continue, build upon and expand such project work between SCs and SSCs.

The HEA has also been remitted in its grant letter to address the recommendations which have emerged from the special QA Task Force in EE, and will be operating in close conjunction with QAA and Foundation Degrees Forward (FDF) to do so.

In the meantime, the HEA is focussing on a further programme of activity, which emphasises two particular areas. The first is the establishment of a Research Observatory for HE, which will address EE as a priority theme. It will bring together the literature and resource in the field, identify research gaps and commission work to fill them, and

encourage active participation and contributions from practitioners and researchers. This was piloted at the HEA conference and at a joint HEA/FDF research conference, both in July 2008.

The second strand comprises support for HEIs, extensively and intensively, in embracing the EE agenda. We will continue the Pro Vice Chancellor and Deputy Principals Network (PVC) special interest group, and have expanded the Exchange Group to become the formal network for HEFCE funded EE pilot projects. We are establishing a directory of consultants from the sector who can deliver specific support to others, with a limited subsidy from the HEA. We also hope to run a 'Network of Networks', which brings together the many initiatives touching upon EE, including Lifelong Learning Networks, Higher Level Skills Pathfinders. 3rd Stream 2nd Mission projects, Flexible Learning Pathfinders, as well as EE pilots themselves.

The HEA has now created a single programme spanning Employability and Employee Learning, and hopes to be able to restore some attention to employability during 2008/9. However, our special funding initiative will continue to emphasise workforce development activity. For more information about these initiatives, please contact rebecca.dodgson@heacademy.ac.uk

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