Employer involvement in design and delivery of part-time higher education

Brenda Little

Higher Education Consultant (formerly Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, the Open University)

Overview of presentation

- UK policy context - calls for greater linkages between higher education and work
- Government - funded initiatives during past 10-15 years
- Future directions?

Underlying drivers for employer involvement in design and delivery

- Greater employer ‘buy-in’..+ notions of co-funding?
- Greater relevance to employee/employer....enhanced learning experiences...?
- Greater ownership of re-skilling, up-skilling current workforce...?

Some government - initiated developments ...

- Introduction of foundation degrees ....employer involvement

- Increased emphasis on the higher education sector getting involved in workforce development....HEFCE-funded ‘Transforming workforce development (WFD) programme’

A government-funded initiative - the foundation degree (1)

- Launched in 2000 to meet perceived need for more people with ‘intermediate higher technical and associate professional skills’ in the workplace ….+ provide a new accessible route in to HE
- Intended to integrate academic and work-based learning
- Intended to be designed and delivered in close collaboration between employers and HE providers (HEIs and further education colleges)
- First major new HE qualification since 1970s, + first short-cycle qualification to have title ‘degree’

A government-funded initiative - the foundation degree (2)

- Enrolments risen steadily since 2001 – now around 100,000 students enrolled (meeting government target)
- 40% study part-time
- Part-time students most likely to study business + administrative studies, or education
- Compared to full-time students, part-time students more likely to be female; more likely to be older – 55% aged over 30 (compared to 25% full-timers)

A government-funded initiative - the foundation degree (3) – evidence of employer involvement...

- Greenwood and Little (2007) study explored impact of fds on learners and employers – found employer involvement ranged from active (close working with provider in developing fd), through to passive (happy to support employees but not involved in development); and none (not involved at all) ..most employers were ‘passive’

- Mason (2010) study of p-t students and their employers – found relatively low level of engagement in design, delivery and assessment, typically limited to project work based on workplace issues …but seeing fd as much to do with personal development as raising skills levels

Broader workforce development – HEFCE programme (1)

- Post –Leitch review of skills, HEFCE mounted large scale programme geared towards HE engaging with workforce development - £150m over period 2008- 2011

- Aim to stimulate demand for, and develop supply of workforce development – particularly through employer-responsive provision

- Two strands: co-funding employer engagement model (to support co-funded entrants to HE); capacity building/ infrastructure developments within HEIs as way of instigating 'transformational change' in employer engagement across the HE sector

Broader workforce development – HEFCE programme (2)

- Independent evaluation of HEFCE's workforce development (WFD) programme (Kewin et al., 2011)
- Government targets for employer co-funded entrants to HE + fd recruitment had been met
- HEIs involved in development programme had developed capacity and capability to respond more effectively to employers' higher level workforce development needs ..but extent of employer engagement in design process varied considerably

Broader workforce development – HEFCE programme (3)

- Impact of HEFCE-WFD programme on wider HE sector modest
- HEIs and employers uncertain what impact new funding arrangements (increased tuition fees + demise of co-funding arrangements) will have on extent and nature of demand for employer-responsive provision meeting workforce development…notwithstanding introduction of tuition fees loans for part-time students

Future directions (1)..Wilson review of business- university collaboration, 2012

- Welcomed Sector Skills Council kitemarking of programmes (e-skillsUK; Cogent; Skillset) ..bringing employers closer to curriculum definition

- But are university and QAA requirements limiting freedom of employers to further influence the curriculum?

- Are employers sufficiently aware of possibility of postgraduate education for corporate upskilling? Would greater employer engagement in curriculum design help?

Future directions (2) ..

- Wilson review suggests (amongst other things) - bespoke degree programmes; industry-sector specific fds; higher-level apprenticeships; in-company upskilling of employees ...

- On past evidence, levels of employer engagement in design and delivery of HE provision highly variable ...

- What are pros/cons of such engagement? Who benefits from such engagement?

Thank you

Brenda Little
Higher Education Consultant
Blittle1@msn.com