

Crafting sustainable futures for Work Based Learning Potential Blue Oceans for post-compulsory education

Elaine Fisher (Bath University) & Kevin Fisher

E.Fisher@bath.ac.uk - University of Bath in Swindon, Oakfield Campus, Marlowe Avenue,
Walcot, Swindon, SN3 3JR

rfkgroup18@yahoo.co.uk – 26 Frome Gardens, Stroud, Gloucestershire, GL5 4LE

Abstract

Identifying and operationalising sustainable work based learning provision that satisfies both academic demands and vocational relevance is a classic tension. This article, based on research into potential HE markets, identifies opportunities and constraints by examining 7 Higher Education Institutions and associated feeder institutions. Other input includes consideration of Lifelong Learning Networks and vocational training initiatives within FE. The research aimed to utilise some of the distinctive elements within Higher Education - academic prowess, autonomy and quality provision. This article proposes potential avenues for that provision based on the models of Kim and Mauborgne (2005) around reconstructing market boundaries.

With the growing emphasis on economically valuable skills and focus on employers as initiators of provision, the article examines consequent evolving patterns on educational professionals and learners. There are opportunities to use the tensions on academic quality versus commercialisation that energise existing provision. However there are concerns over the models proposed due to potential loss of the wider social benefits and soft outcomes that more formal provision enjoys.

The research examined values placed by industry on provision and how engagement may be furthered. The work acknowledges Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) regarding learner progression not always being linear and how this aspect may be addressed or even harnessed. There are other potential benefits that can be highlighted to employers – collateral benefits to other staff identified by Fuller and Unwin (2003).

In conclusion, this article critically analyses the opportunities available to WBL praxis and provision. It poses questions around the strategies and structure of post compulsory education. Can the crafting skills and experience of the sector match the perceptions and demands of both employers and learners or will there always be ongoing tension and dichotomy?

Introduction

The challenges for Higher Education to create long term, sustainable futures for the sector are well known. Not all the challenges affect each institution to a similar extent however there are sufficient challenges to give pause for thought and a desire to establish strategies to accommodate existing strengths whilst producing a sustainable future. Articulating these challenges can take many different forms but some appear to be:

- recruitment – many institutions find this is of little concern whilst others are effected by demographics – even the promises of immigration increasing the available “pool” of candidates can be responsive to external forces such as the number of East European workers now returning to their home states
- retention – many institutions enjoy high rates of retention and achievement, however others may find issues with a student base more susceptible to change or ennui
- reputation – this is a key strength of the sector and individual institutions can rightly and proudly demonstrate their worth to a wide community – however some departments may have issues which reflect increasing student confrontation around grades, curriculum content - even litigation
- well established and innovative curriculum respected by students and organisations – however some departments may be struggling to keep up-to-date with change, equipment and innovations
- finance – many institutions enjoy an environment where academic excellence, innovation and reputation rests on a bedrock of sound financial sustainability which exerts little or no pressure on staffing or curriculum design – other institutions may need to question existing costs and traditional income streams

This review was prompted by a requirement to study the general practice of the sector towards employer engagement and promotion of quality practice. It involved assessing existing research but also conducting interviews to gather views of the key parties within the process – Higher Education institutions, learners and employers. The requirement was to produce a digest of strategic opportunities and how the communities of learning may best operationalise those opportunities.

This article provides only a short synopsis of the wider review, attempting to capitalise on key considerations and models for the future whilst acknowledging the key contributions of others to the debate on sustainability in Higher Education.

Methodology

The original review commissioned was required to answer research questions around:

- the perceived strengths of the Higher Education sector
- perceptions of employers towards Higher Education
- strategies and tactics that could engender closer engagement between Higher Education and employers

To achieve these aims 7 Higher Education Institutions and associated feeder institutions were researched by way of interviews with staff working in identified areas of employer engagement. Other input included feedback from interviews and reports from Lifelong Learning Networks and vocational training initiatives within Further Education. Three major employers (each with in excess of 5000 staff) were identified and interviews undertaken with training & development departmental staff. Additional input and data was taken from available sources in the post-compulsory sector.

There was no requirement within the review commissioned to undertake a detailed Literature Review given that most authors appeared to agree with the broad challenges and strengths of the sector.

Consequently a short literature review was conducted including existing research on the supply chain between Further and Higher Education, reviews of the sector's views of the future and analysis of employer/ learner views.

Models were analysed and adapted to accommodate the requirements to form strategic views of the sector and how future sustainable success may be engendered. The review was designed to focus on the future to gain benefits identified by the Strategic Futures Team (2001) by:

- increasing the range of policy options
- expanding timescales
- stimulating creativity"

The original research answered the three main research questions in the context within which they were commissioned. Permission was gained to simplify the main findings and strategies to be distributed to a wider audience. Consequently this review produces models and options to promote discussion and debate.

Literature Review

The complexities facing Higher Education including the different emphases and interpretations they place on the various agenda facing them can be challenging. Wedgwood (2008) has developed the Diversity with Excellence model to address these difficulties and it is a visual way to capture the 'pushes and pulls' on resources and directions that face institutions. Some of these issues are outlined below such as Diplomas, demographics and employer engagement targets.

Higher Education: issues and complexities

If one initially considers the new paradigms of the design and delivery of Higher Education it is clear that the landscape has radically altered. There is potentially a move away from 18-21 year old school leavers, with issues around demographic trends, to that of employers and employees. The starting point is no longer the subject discipline but rather situated within the context of work. Entry qualifications are now far more varied, and with the new Diplomas starting in September, there will be even more to consider. Teaching delivery is no longer simply in the HEI but can be found in the workplace and, to a greater extent than before, in FE. There is the demand for individual learning packages, blended learning, work based assessment, mixed delivery mode, part time and open programmes. There is now a new language which encompasses these changes so that it is 'knowledge and skills and competencies not just skills'; 'intellectual knowledge and skills combined with occupational skills and knowledge' and 'practical insight with academic experience'. (Wedgwood, 2007)

According to the head of HEFCE the 18 to 21 year old school-leaver is no longer in 'the driving seat' of the higher education sector. The funding council have confirmed those recipients who are set to benefit from nearly £50 million which has been allocated to develop degree courses in partnership with businesses. As learners will be juggling full-time work, family responsibilities and higher education they will inevitably demand more personalised ways of learning. Chief Executive of HEFCE, David Eastwood, has stated that the sector is witnessing the birth of 'a new economy' with fees for students and an employer contributing a greater proportion of the sector's funding (THE news 28 Feb 2008)

There is a push from the government for universities to work with employers in order to design new degree courses and they want 10,000 students in 2009-10 to be on courses that are co-funded by employers with a further 20,000 in 2010-11. There is a challenging task ahead to persuade employers of the mutual benefits that will come from co-funded courses. There are a growing number of universities and colleges that are developing innovative approaches to leadership and management training which draws on the experiences of the workplace. There is also a growing demand for courses which provide credit for prior or experiential learning together with a growing recognition that learning within the workplace, either formal or informal, can be accredited towards degrees. Therefore this leads into the discussion around employer engagement as a process and the challenges that may be encountered.

Employer Engagement

Strategic activity to facilitate employer engagement includes the development of the Lifelong Learning Networks, Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, budding relationships between HE and SSCs, Higher Level Skills Pathfinders and a range of

other activities which are being funded through the Higher Education Innovation Fund now worth £164 million. The pathfinders which were fully operational from January 2007 have been set up to allow for the testing out of the regional structures needed to connect employers to higher education provision particularly through the development of an integrated brokerage scheme. Not only is the face of HE changing but the strategy also changes the body as well. (Edexcel policy watch, 20th Nov 2006)

If one considers the report 'Trends V: Universities Shaping the European Higher Education Area' it appears that the focus for 'universities in the broad sense of the term' is shifting from governmental actions to the implementation of reforms within the institutions and a broad support for the 'underlying idea of more student-centred and problem based learning'. The report also suggests that a key priority in curricula reform is employability, however results show that there is much work to be done to translate this into institutional practice. One of the main challenges is to 'strengthen dialogue with employers and other external stakeholders' in order to ensure higher education is more responsive to the needs of society and labour market.

In conjunction with this is the move away from teacher centred provision to a more learner centred approach. This move towards provision matching student needs is characteristic of the policies currently driving the educational landscape in the UK. Demand led funding, individual rights to a wide range of provision at the potential expense of the rest of the student population and the increasing challenge of students if their expectations do not meet reality reveals a vista that many educationalists do not recognise. In addition funding changes have seriously eroded lifelong learning opportunities for many whereas the push for employability has increased.

Higher Education is under considerable pressure to expand in order to meet the rising skill needs. There are also pressures to recruit from the lower socio-economic groups which are still low despite work from Aim higher and funding to enable participation from this group. There is also the need for stronger links with business and the economy. Strengthening the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) to encourage in particular the non research-intensive universities to work with employers is intended to facilitate this to happen. Through HEIF there will be funding to a network of Knowledge Exchanges to reward and support those HE institutions who are working with businesses. The establishment of the three Higher Level Skills Pathfinders has been in response to the government agenda and the links with Train to Gain has endeavoured to ensure a seamless service to employers from Level 2 all the way through to Higher Education.

However education has perceived benefits far wider than the technical knowledge and skills it can impart.

Social benefits of education

In Social Bridges II (2008) the Treasury stress the importance of human capital for growth and social inclusion are explored. The paper focuses particularly on the issue of human capital for promoting employability and social cohesion:

The knowledge-based economy favours labour market entrants and workers with higher skills, while technological and structural change may require new and different types of skills, which need to be updated through the lifecycle. Human capital formation is therefore crucial – to promote opportunity and employability of workers, and to increase the innovative capacity of companies and economies. Demographic change makes a culture of lifelong learning even more important. Education alone, however, is not enough (p.3).

Therefore there needs to be a labour market where barriers to participation are removed by policies 'and set in the context of well-functioning labour, product and capital markets and macroeconomic stability that together allow for high levels of job creation and international competitiveness' (p.3)

The policies need to address pre-school learning; standards in primary and secondary education; provision of greater choice through real alternatives to academic routes; access to tertiary education; culture of lifelong learning and barriers to labour market participation by marginalised workers.

In today's global economy there has been a shift towards a more knowledge-based economy which in turn has placed a greater emphasis on the skills of the workforce. Technological advancements have meant that retraining and up-skilling have become a necessity of everyday life. Leaving the final word to the Treasury (2008) again in Social Bridges II:

Policies that seek to enhance an individual's human capital – for example through training and education – need to be complemented by policies that remove barriers and disincentives to work, especially for groups and individuals on the margins of the labour market (p.7).

Clearly Higher Education can facilitate the widening of education which in turn bring the social benefits of more participative, economically active and integrated communities.

This builds on the existing potential the HE system in the UK offers as described below.

Higher Education – the power of potential

There are many commentaries on the continuing and perceived unique value of the UK's Higher Education sector – The Council for Industry and Higher Education (2006) highlighted the over-arching praxis:

Our system of higher education differs from most other systems in having problem-based learning at its core. This process of challenge and enquiry reinforces the potential for innovation (p.7).

The Council (2006) also elaborate on one of the potential routes that the sector could take to gain opportunity:

The search for best value is leading an increasing number of businesses to outsource to the lower cost and increasingly skilled workforces in Asia. At the same time it is leading them to develop higher added-value products, services and management approaches and look for innovative solutions in countries where there is intellectual fire-power that can think laterally and offer solutions not just to today's problems but also tomorrow's (p 7).

Whilst this is laudable feedback on the sector there are perceived dangers from exploiting the strengths in a commercial sense. In particular with research the Times Higher Education Supplement editorial (2008) puts the position succinctly:

There is an inherent danger that in their pell-mell rush to commercialise research, universities will compromise a fundamental part of their mission. Knowledge is their prime business, not its exploitation (p.23).

This tension between the need to generate income whilst maintaining academic and research excellence has always been a key challenge to the sector. The desire to provide some form of measurement of the impact of research is useful however the Times Higher Education Supplement (2008) again reports on how difficult this can be:

Philip Esler (RCUK) commenting on the possibility of producing an algorithm to quantify the economic impact of research." At this stage, the research councils don't believe that a quantitative assessment is possible... although we have been able to quantify economic impacts from a range of case studies, we don't believe we successfully generated a methodology to scale up to cover the entirety of our funding (p.5).

However the literature review would not be complete without considering the views of the employers themselves.

Employer Views

The general view describing employers and education appears to be that whilst the majority of employers deem qualifications interesting there is always a requirement to see a reflection of that investment in profits.

However research has found that employers value Higher Education provision – one of the many views is espoused by Brennan (2005):

... employers of graduates have frequently indicated that they value the attributes and qualities that graduates bring to their organisations. It is essential therefore that these qualities continue to be relevant, especially in the context of the significant expansion of the higher education sector. Yet another reason for higher education to engage in work-based learning is that it allows higher education to play to its strengths, in assessing and accrediting learning outcomes (p.5).

This is understandable but attempts to produce an effective mechanistic approach to evaluating such an impact have proven difficult. The views of learners do add another aspect to the discussions around the values placed on education.

Learners

Learners do appear to place value of qualifications given the numbers taking both Further and Higher levels. This will be for many reasons but Huddleston and Unwin (1997) articulate the key reason:

Given the changing nature of most workplaces and the job market means a more competitive environment in which qualification credentialism is rampant (p.148).

The need for qualifications therefore may be well recognised – however the motivations for progression to Higher Education can be many and complex as Bloomer and Hodgkinson (1999) suggest:

The catalogue of factors involved in progression from FE to university illustrates one of the main findings from this

study: that young people's learning careers are highly complex and so, therefore, are their choices of, and progression to, university. This was always the case in the past (p.91).

Therefore this review does not attempt to analyse the motivation for progression but seeks to identify how this progression can be directed, assisted and encouraged.

The promotion of innovative practices and skills for learners appears to gain much support, as summarised by the Department for Innovation Universities and Skills (2008):

The effects of innovative people are self-reinforcing: innovative businesses are attracted to highly skilled and creative workforces and, in turn, innovative people are drawn towards exciting and challenging career opportunities (p.7).

Therefore the rewards are perceived as worth the investment in the employees. However the underlying consideration around investment is the finance that supports education.

Finance

Funding is a continual discipline that requires constant re-examination of structures to ensure efforts maintain the balance between academic investigation being supported by financial rigour

As the Wellcome Trust informed the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills (2006):

The importance of moving towards financial sustainability of UK universities cannot be underestimated. The introduction of full economic costing has enabled good progress to be made, but robust financial management and significant investment will continue to be required (p.2).

There was frequent comment in the main research that employers only wanted parts of qualifications that directly relate to their perceived commercial interests. This comment was then challenged during interviews with the question as to why public funds would be used for industry without gaining any of the wider benefits to society of the learner undertaking a wider qualification. However if perceived commercially relevant units alone were required then this could be financed by industry itself – if public funding was required then an arrangement had to take place between the public purse and expected returns.

The emphasis on funding and associated costs of provision prompted the research to pose questions around how strategically the Higher Education sector viewed itself. Therefore an attempt was made to identify areas where provision could occur which built on strengths but had a specific view towards costs and income – which is detailed in the next section on Blue Ocean Modelling.

Blue Ocean Modelling

The aim of organisations seeking to prosper in both a commercial environment whilst maintaining an academic approach requires an approach which ensures the perception of value whilst controlling costs but encouraging the user to provide sufficient funds. That this can be achieved in a competitive environment does place reliance on actual or perceived innovation. Kim and Mauborgne (2005) argue that to achieve a long-term

sustainable future the organisation is required to explore new opportunities (blue oceans) rather than competing in the original marketplace (red ocean) where only traditional pressures and opportunities exist. Kim and Mauborgne suggest that:

Competition- based red ocean strategy assumes that an industry's structural conditions are given and that firms are forced to compete within them, an assumption based on what the academics call the structuralist view, or environmental determinism (p17).

Kim and Mauborgne argue that where an organisation considers development outside of their traditional markets into areas not currently occupied by organisations with similar aims a new opportunity can be produced. Calling this a reconstructuralist view they describe the approach compared to staying within traditional markets (2005):

In the reconstructuralist world, however, the strategic aim is to create new best-practice rules by breaking the existing value-cost trade-offs thereby creating a blue ocean (p.8).

The Modernising Government White Paper (1999) makes the case clear for innovation – even by using the word 26 times in the same document. The White Paper makes it clear the Government wants change:

The Government is committed to public service. But that does not mean public services should stand still. Public servants must be the agents of the changes citizens and businesses want. We will build on the many strengths in the public sector to equip it with a culture of improvement, innovation and collaborative purpose (p10).

Adapting the authors' summary of strategies has produced some ideas around how the Higher Education sector may views its long-term future. The authors use the metaphors of "oceans" being the markets in which the organisations operate – red oceans being the existing environment where they may compete with others (and hence have a steadily reducing number of strategies to accommodate) and blue oceans where there are identified opportunities not accessed by others where innovation can be rewarded with market dominance. This can be summarised as follows:

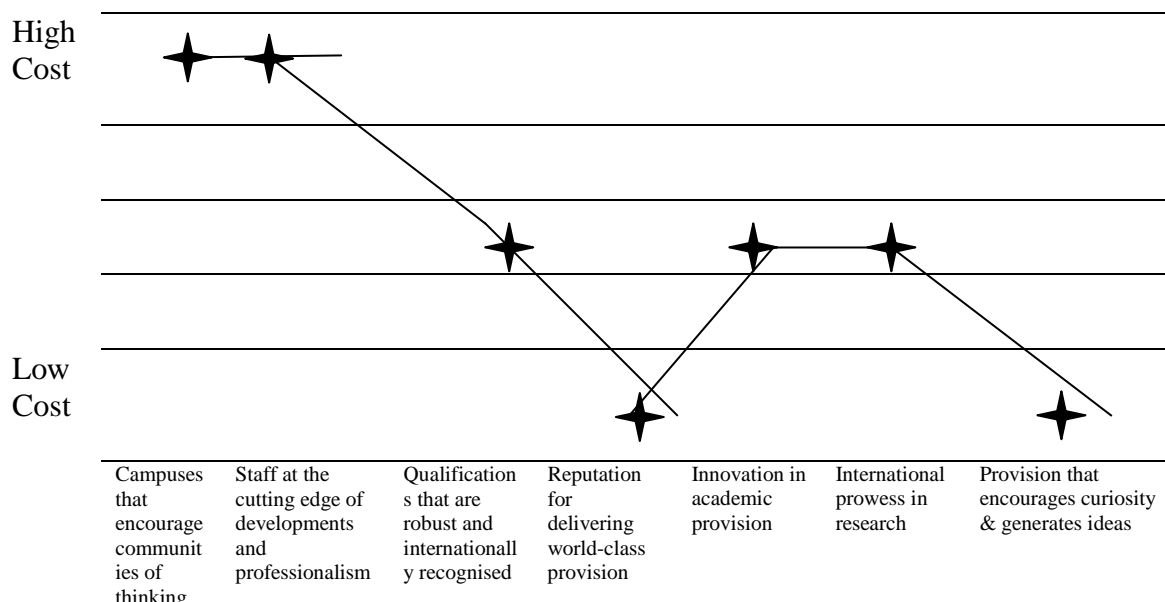
Red Ocean Strategy	Blue Ocean strategy
Organisation competes in existing marketplace	Create uncontested market space
Aim is to "beat" the opposition	Make competition irrelevant
Exploit existing demand	Create and capture new demand
Balancing the costs of provision with the perceived value of those paying for that provision	Remove wherever possible the tension between perceived cost and value
All institutional strategies are focussed on current environment by stressing strategic choice of differentiation or low cost	All institutional strategies are focussed on current environment by stressing strategic choice of differentiation and low perceived cost

Adapted Kim and Mauborgne (2005, p 18)

The process by which new opportunities are identified involves examining what the organisation provides and what is most valued out of that provision. Where possible

areas of high cost and low value are eliminated or replaced to produce a high perception of value, lower cost and within a market context that other organisations have yet to identify. By entering these new contexts before others and dominating competition becomes irrelevant as others cannot or will not compete.

This process can be reflected by way of a model as seen below where the key strengths of Higher Education are matched to values placed upon those strengths. The vertical axis describes the perceived value of an area whilst the horizontal itemises the keys areas provided by an organisation.



The aim would be to reduce costs in the high areas whilst emphasising value and development in low cost areas. This is not to suggest that reductions in campuses and staff would be an answer – it is more what strategies are best used in these areas whilst increasing the perceived value of the low cost areas. This review seeks to address these tensions and provide strategies.

Higher Education is strong in developing new and innovative ideas – is there a market for such techniques? The review only needs to cite Hamel and Breen (2007) stating:

We know a lot about why large companies are incompetent at certain things (like proactively reinventing their strategies or growing new businesses) yet despite a mountain of advice and admonition, few companies seem to have overcome these limitations (p.40).

Therefore industry would indeed benefit from the strengths that Higher Education can bring to their organisational development. Trying to utilise the employer to partially undertake the costly role of the campus and staff by offering perceived improved innovatory improvements to the business alongside qualifications, research and creativity appealed to the employer and educational organisations involved.

Options for Strategy

This section focuses on some of the key feedback gained during the research and analysis phase. Initially there is a review of the lifelong Learning Network input. Then a model that could be used to describe and identify ways forward for the Higher Education Sector and associated broader strategy. Finally some suggestions are made, from ideas

generated by the sector during the research, on more specific tactics that could be adopted with a view to establishing a clear market presence and thereby a “blue ocean” for Higher Education organisations.

Lifelong Learning Networks

The challenges that research through the WVLLN identified appear to resonate with feedback from the Higher Education sector. The development of progression agreements which focus on the transferability of vocational skills and knowledge raised issues of academic quality, relevance and aptitude of learners. Consultation with admissions, faculties and schools appears to have been the way forward. The lack of awareness of the content of the vocational qualifications appears to have been at the heart of reluctance to accept that a learner having undertaken a vocational qualification in for example childcare might want to move to undertaking an undergraduate degree in Business. This is in spite of the fact that ‘A’ level students have a wide spectrum of choices when contemplating moving on to higher education.

There is still considerable academic and vocational divide even though there are a number of awarding bodies that offer qualifications that are respected there is a confusing and vast array of qualifications many with few clear progression routes between them. A review of Level 3 Skills in the South West produced by SLIM (2007) has shown that with the exception of Apprenticeships, nothing that is currently offered in the vocational area is as appealing to young people, the public, employers and higher education as the traditional ‘A’ Level and GCSEs (14-19 Education White Paper). The research that underpins the WVLLN agreements would support this although it is clear that discussions with HE around Apprenticeships still leave considerable gaps in terms of awareness of the potential progression possibilities for those particular learners.

The engagement with employers has been an essential part of the work of the WVLLN and has informed not only curriculum development but also how the network has approached collaborative practices. Through the work of the progression strand collaborative strategic regional groups have been established with Train to Gain, Higher Level Skills Pathways Project, LSC, Aimhigher, Training Provider Networks and 14-19 local authority partnerships to identify best practice, establish case studies, promote collaborative working and avoid duplication of workloads. During these meetings it has been possible to canvas ideas and views on employer engagement across a wide range of areas including the new Diplomas, Apprenticeships, curriculum developments, identifying best practice and how to work to avoid duplication of effort.

It has become clear that the best way to engage with employers from a Higher Education perspective is to ensure that employers are responded to in a positive and dynamic manner. Expectations are that their needs will be met by the most efficient and effective way possible. From discussions with these groups it became obvious that employers are interested in training but only if it meets their needs and the needs of their employees. Training has to be delivered in a work-based way that ensures that employees gain the most benefit and can utilise their previous experience so they can improve performance.

The range of initiatives which have been established to facilitate the involvement of employers within the world of higher education have caused some degree of confusion as well as the potential for overlap. The research that has been carried out through the LLN has shown that in order for all parties to benefit fully from some of these programmes it is essential for collaborative ways of working to be developed. Protocols which indicate ways of working go some way to gain acceptance amongst partners as does the will to ensure that the learner is at the heart of whatever is undertaken.

Modelling Strategic Sustainability

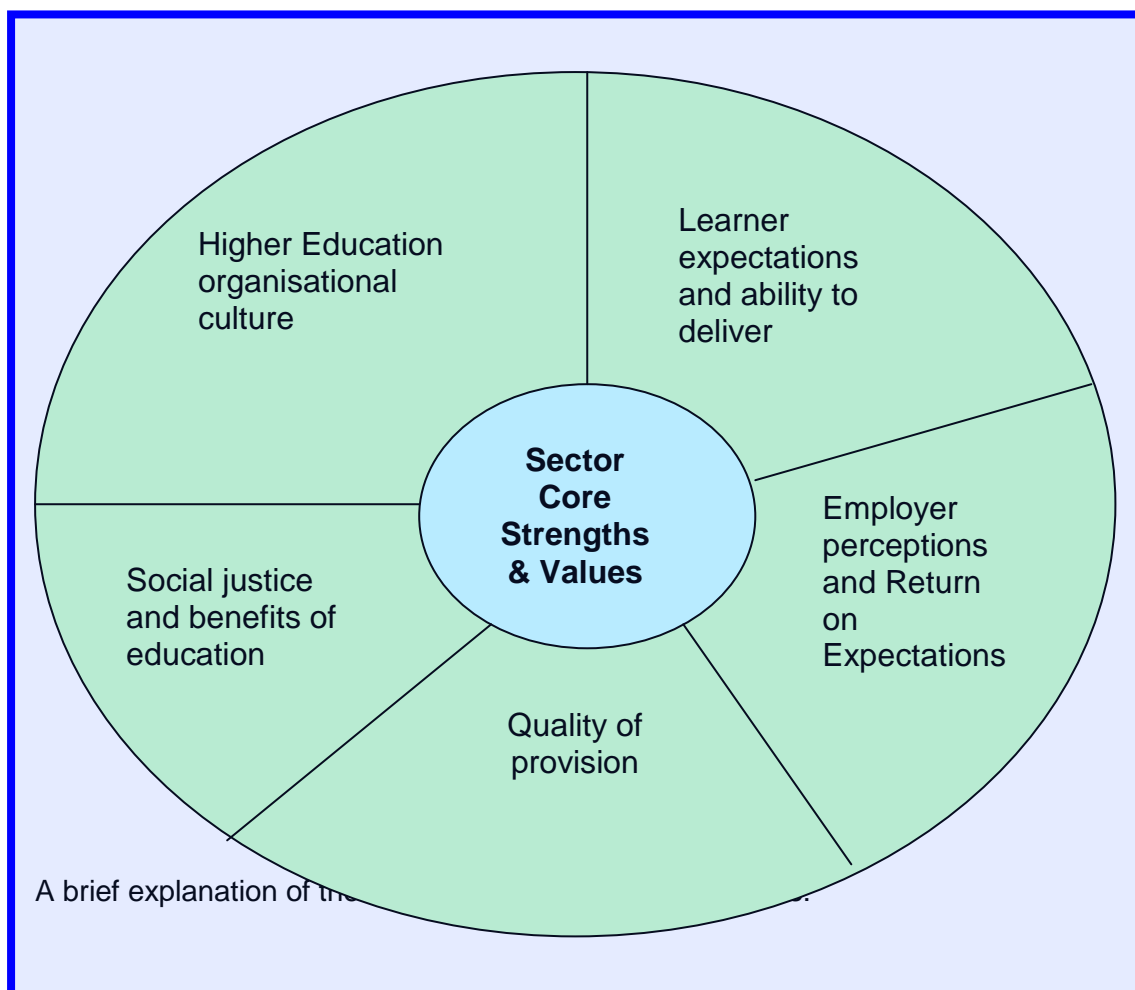
How might HE and WBL in particular build a sustainable future which matches the education need, strengths of HE and finance available. This section looks at some possibilities by examining strengths and assessing opportunities.

The core strengths of the Higher Education system can be articulated in many ways and may vary according to institution. However in response to the research questioning employers, students and Higher Education institutions there appeared to be some agreement of how a "University" was perceived

1. A strong, positive reputation in the community
2. Strong emphasis on innovation and creative solutions
3. Reputation for conducting research and possessing the necessary skills and knowledge to make this robust including questioning of existing practices
4. Strong communities of learning for both learners and practitioners enabling sharing, peer review and centres of academic excellence

The study found that if certain key strategies could be aligned then the environment for engaging with employers to enable quality provision within a realistic cost could occur. The elements needed to come together and then be supported by a range of tactics to promote the strategies.

Model for strategic sustainability within the Higher Education sector



- Sector Core Strengths and Values -The Higher Education strengths and values are key to the success of the sector. Therefore these form the core of the model as they hold the rest of the segments together to produce a well-recognised, quality level of provision
- Learner expectations and ability to deliver - The learner's own perceptions of value with provision and their ability to match the academic and work-based demands to achieve
- Employer perceptions and Return on Expectations - How employers perceive provision and what returns they might anticipate when reviewing the process. Expectations include both "hard" measures of impact and also "soft" qualitative anticipated outcomes. Where both types of measures can be identified and agreed in advance the impact of provision on the business is far easier to define and thereby to evidence that it has had a positive impact.
- Quality of provision - A key requirement to maintain the positive strengths of Higher Education in delivering quality provision, respected by both the local communities and the wider world.
- Social justice and benefits of education - Whilst there are expectations and perceptions of employers and learners the process does also provide benefits to the wider community in return for the investment of public money.
- Higher Education organisational culture - The unique organisational culture of Higher Education and how this can either be harnessed to promote the provision effectively or altered to reflect the changing demands of innovation.

There was feedback from both employers and the Higher Educations sector that identifying key information and skills within the said sector was important as a precursor to deciding what could be delivered or staff planning that needed to occur. The type of staff required and capture of the "knowledge" they possessed agreed with the views of Collison and Parcell (2004):

Its not about creating an encyclopaedia that captures every-thing that anybody ever knew. Rather, it's about keeping track of these who know the recipe, and nurturing the culture and the technology that will get them talking (p.16).

That this raised challenges was also fed back into the review – which seemed best summarised by Senior (1997):

The basic philosophical differences between the assumptions and values of organisational development and those of the bureaucratic model (which is typical of most public sector organisations) are significant because public sector organisations typically reflect strong adherence to bureaucratic norms and behaviour patterns – forms and patterns foreign to those of organisational development – therefore making organisational development difficult and sensitive, though not impossible (p.289).

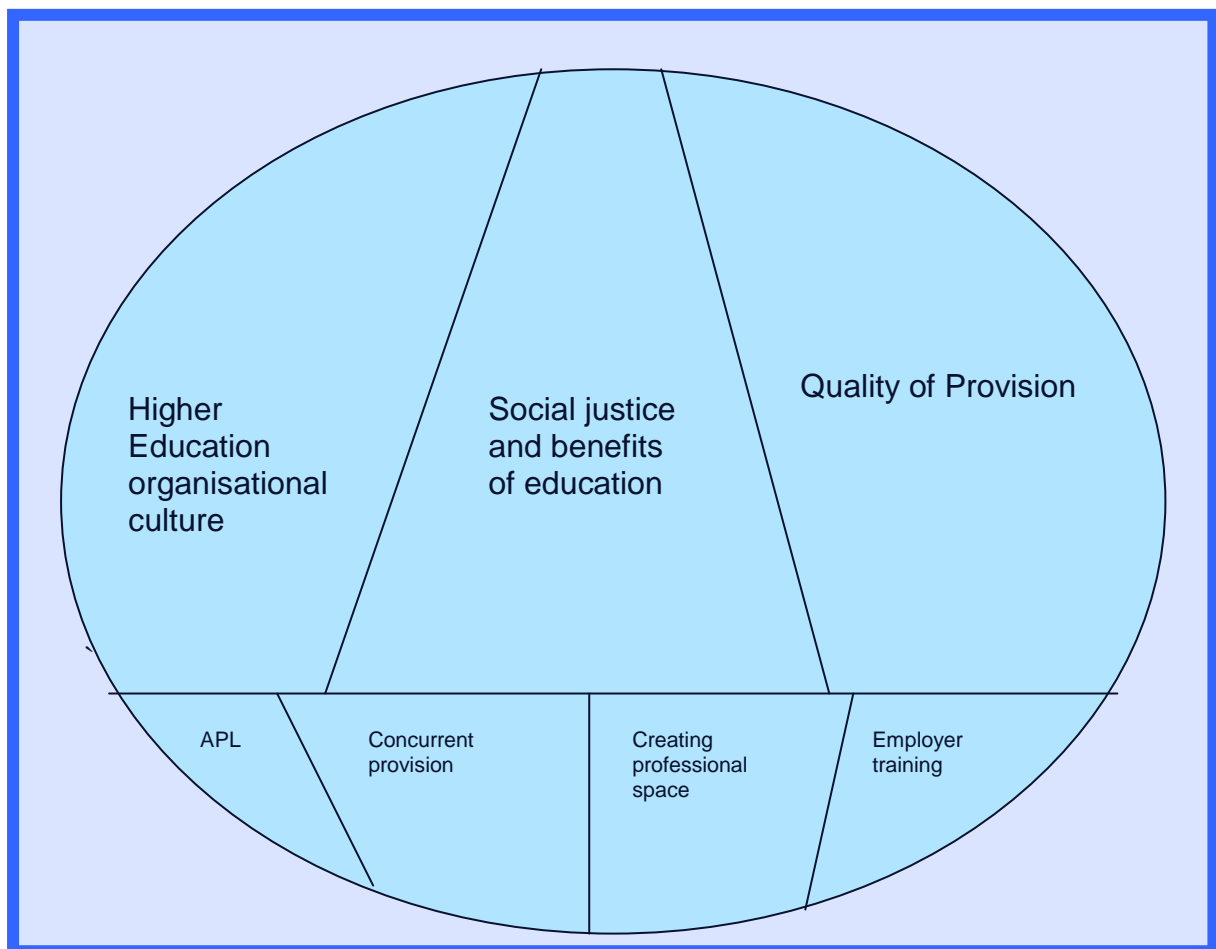
That the sector was viewed as having both a hierarchical structure and also perceived difficulties in cross-disciplinary operations was seen as a challenge. Employers desired an integrated offer to meet their needs which would require cross-centre operations within a Higher Education institution – or across possibly several partners – a concept of qualification "multi-badging".

There would be many options to create such inter-disciplinary work – however key was the support and promotion of such strategies by the most senior management to ensure good intentions occurred throughout the organisation.

Tactical Options for WBL

Underpinning the strategic elements of the model are various tactics that could be adopted to meet those strategies. In turn these could be selected or rotated to achieve best fit with the environment of the employer or learner.

A view of how tactics could be implemented with the model would be as follows:



- Creating professional space - It has been identified that employers relate University Campuses and provision with degrees and full-time learners. Whilst recognising that these facilities are ideally suited to full time learners business perceives therefore they do not serve commercial organisations.

To present a perceived approach to business employers suggest that areas are created, preferably away from traditional campuses, where meetings can be held in a “commercially-oriented” atmosphere. The Higher Education sector can then explore the aims and strategies of those businesses and be better placed to understand the needs that may emerge to foster long-term sustainable relationships for WBL provision.

- Adaptation of employer training to match provision - Industry spends substantial amounts of money each year on training and development. Some have very highly regarded training programmes to train staff in the skills and knowledge required by the business. It has been found that certain training programmes currently in operation mirror modules within Higher Education provision. Study is undertaken, assessment made and evidenced as part of the training programme.

It was suggested by both employers and the Higher Education sector that work could be undertaken to assess in-house training, devise suitable evidence options which could then result in attraction of University credits within modules. Accordingly the provision would be actually delivered, in part, by the employer whilst being accredited as part of a wider qualification by WBL in Higher Education. In this way the cost burden would be shouldered by the employer whilst receiving recognition.

There is a growing interest from employers in accrediting the learning of their employees and many have put in place systems which will accredit this learning. There is evidence from QCA that employers are interested in ensuring their systems resonate with sector wide, national or even potentially international recognition. There are many however who still provide training which is not accredited and whilst they may be interested in moving towards accreditation costs implications do enter their calculations. Therefore matching existing training to achieve credit may well be a useful half-way house.

Two employers within the wider study indicated that, with only marginal amendments, existing employee training in management could be adjusted to gain suitable credits from WBL within one of the Higher Education institutions in the study.

- Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning - Navigating through the rivers of prior learning causes learners considerable difficulties. Although there is a strong culture within organisations of acknowledging prior learning in the context of work, in terms of the wider context of lifelong learning this form of learning is considerably underutilised.

APL processes have a long legacy and there is considerable expertise and experience of APL in the UK. However in terms of recognition of learners and their access the high cost and time taken for APL processes results in many learners following a full study programme rather than the unwieldy processes around APL.

There is a need, as identified by the QCA, for stakeholders to be actively involved to promote APL within the QCF. They also identified that the current policy, funding and regulatory framework will need to be reviewed to ensure a 'conducive environment for APL'.

The move towards a demand led system has raised the profile of APL although there is no clear evidential base which would lead us to believe that the demand for APL will grow exponentially. However the pressure from HEFCE on Lifelong Learning Networks (LLN) (CHERI Interim evaluation) to target adult learners, which inevitably results in consideration of APL, has meant that the spotlight has grown brighter.

In terms of higher education the varieties of policies and procedures varies not simply between institutions but also between schools and faculties. The challenge to many LLNs is gaining agreement between HEI partners to adopt clear and transparent approaches to APL which will also include terminology,

evidence required and format. Time and cost are also issues which may well cause stumbling blocks to many engaged with this work.

In conjunction with the interest in APL there is an increased pressure on stakeholders to ensure that their programmes reflect the growing demand for employability and skills. The move away from learning for learning sake which permeated the higher educational landscape for centuries has inevitably meant a potential schism between academic rigour and vocational relevance. There is still pressure on higher education to produce high level research, commit to excellence in teaching as well as engaging with the economy and wider society.

- Concurrent provision - This option would use the work practices within an employer, which are duly monitored and evidenced, to be used towards credit accumulation within WBL. This would resemble the mapping and recognition of employer training schemes as discussed above – however this would be purely the work-related outcomes rather than outcomes from training system.
- Dual accreditation – Brennan suggests (2005) “Participants attend training workshops and complete an assessment portfolio for the purpose of achieving the University Certificate. This assessment portfolio can also be used as part of the evidence for the NVQ” (p 44)

These tactics were suggestions raised by participants, both employers and Higher Education sector individuals during the research. These needed to be firmly integrated with the strategies identified previously to achieve the desired effect. The model indeed was created in order that such tactics could be "rotated" to serve the best impact for a WBL strategy.

Conclusion

The research found enthusiasm, either by innovatory zeal or financial pressures, for Higher Education to engage more actively with employers. Employers in turn did recognise the strengths of Higher Education although frequently had not matched these views with active engagement. That there needed to be establishment of common ground, aid wider understanding of both business aims and the benefits of WBL provision, was clearly a requirement.

The model produced for WBL did appear to offer a method of identifying key components and challenging organisations to articulate how such strategies may be met. That this required changes in organisational processes and culture was felt by many – and that these would present a challenge. One Higher Education participant did judge that the status quo regarding weak employer engagement within his institution was “simply no longer an option”.

However there needed to be an environment with a clearly articulated vision, a desire for both Higher Education and employers to meet “half-way” in order to facilitate the most effective provision. Tensions within both commerce and education could be aligned – however the question remained about how far the desire could be transmuted into sustainable activity.

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