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**Engaging with employers: quality and the challenge to academic frameworks. (0234)**

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**Research Domain: Academic Practice, Work and Cultures**

Employer engagement has become one of the major challenges for HE, arising from both inside and outside academia. Consequently HEIs have been challenged to demonstrate successful, flexible and sustainable ways of engaging new students. As a result, even the previously unambiguous way academic disciplines and identities have been understood is becoming less certain. This paper presents a range of academic developments from case studies, discussions and policy documents that illustrate emerging academic frameworks for employer engagement as well as opportunities for developing open, flexible and applied learning for all HE students. The way universities engage with employers, local communities and local and international students requires a shift and a rebalancing - A shift from the false dichotomy of vocational and academic learning, and a balancing of the civic and economic purposes of HE.

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### **Paper outline**

#### Introduction

Employer engagement is the major UK HE challenge for the near future, arising from both inside and outside the academic community (CBI 2008). Practitioners, policy makers and managers within HEIs have been challenged, along with a number of other regional, national and global issues to demonstrate successful, flexible and sustainable ways of engaging new students (DIUS2008, Leitch 2006). The very role and concept of European HE, and in particular, work education has not been under such great debate since the 1980s (Giroux 1991, Furedi 2008, Rinne and Koivula 2009). The previously unambiguous way academic disciplines and identities have been understood is becoming less certain (Tynjala et al 2003)

Along side this, globally linked and culturally diverse students are setting their own expectations of HE provision. Walk through the grand new foyers of many universities – ‘old’ and ‘new’ and it feels, sounds and looks radically different (Forstorp 2008). It is radically different, but are we keeping up, with our main business, *enriching* the minds of those able to benefit from higher learning. Despite the bold aspiration of HE actively promoting social and economic mobility (Stern et al 1998), how many HE staff feel a little apprehensive about some of the many changes demanded of them, at all levels, across their institutions? (Johnson 2001).

The perspectives of HE staff, academic, administrative, support, and management, have been subject to so many challenges (Saunders 1999) as a result of government initiatives and funding methodologies that there is no longer a ‘constant context’ within which to understand their profession. But that is the nature of professionalism. However, HE professionals can be expected to embrace

educational and disciplinary challenges (Chalmers et al 2001) – possibly the key current challenge – provision of learning in applied contexts.

This paper presents a range of academic developments from case studies, discussions and policy documents that illustrate emerging academic frameworks for employer engagement\_as well as opportunities for developing open, flexible and applied learning for al HE students

### 1. Flexible patterns and markets

What enhances 'part-time' student success?

- Initial compulsory, academically intensive residential blocks
- Comprehensive hard copy and online pre-residential administrative and academic material
- Ongoing 1:1 academic supervision, workplace mentoring and electronic cohort seminars

Study patterns that provide flexibility through:

- Extended maximum number of years to gain a certain qualification
- A simple unified credit points system that learners and employers understand
- Modules made up of units as small as 5 credits

Targeting regional and international markets through:

- A unique offer, building on institutional strengths, and employer/professionally relevant
- Ongoing blended learning provision
- Professional standard and extended hour residential facilities

### 2. Accessibility, student orientation and staff development

Ensuring Accessibility through:

- Accreditation of prior work based learning
- Qualifications aligned with professional competencies and development
- Effective support services and advice

How do we achieve student orientation?

- Clear initial point of contact with the university
- Supported learning contract negotiation
- Robust VLE, support and networking infrastructure for staff and students

How can staff be supported and developed?

- Initial joint staff development for new staff
- Ongoing, annual staff development for experienced staff
- Dedicated online tutor resources

### 3. Applied, generic and professional learning

Develop work-based learning communities through:

- A limited range of clearly defined but interlinked strands
- Identification of cross strand themes (eg sector, methodology, employment level)
- Common structured programme of continuous formative and summative assessments

What kinds of generic learning can be accredited?

- Transferable reading, writing and study skills
- Practice/workplace research, evaluations and problem-solving

- Management, leadership and enterprise across different professional sectors  
What kinds of modules are professionally relevant?
- Sector specific learning, competencies and professional development frameworks
- Relevant vocational discipline specific learning
- Choice of range of modules for wider learning and knowledge

### **Quality and policy in engaging employers with academic frameworks**

Is it possible or indeed desirable to endeavour to enshrine a fixed conceptualisation of quality in HE? We *can* talk of, for example the purpose of generic modules as providing opportunities for wider and contemporary academic literature review, reflective and critical thinking and use of advanced/online literature searching and resources. We can offer an understanding of 'postraduateness' as recognising the central importance of independent, critical, professionally relevant and ethical inquiry. And we can develop the minds of students on vocational programmes through, for example, professional guest speakers, former student reflections, and encouraging professional dissemination.

However, new areas of quality assurance arise from the developing arenas HE actively participates in. For example, specific institutional ethical protocols should be set up for WBL including guidelines on plagiarism, CRB checks, data protection, intellectual property rights, and subject-specific ethics panels – with the responsibilities of learners, HE institutions and workplaces clearly and systematically set out.

Especially in public sector arenas such as the NHS, guidelines on confidentiality and anonymising of data, clear ethical and professional purpose of projects, compulsion free participation and withdrawal, and fully informed consent to participation, are essential. Such protocols, guidelines and professional approaches signify a new the willingness of HE to respect and learn from these new arenas and are essential in helping to build sustainable relationships with employers (Moran 2009)

The way universities engage with employers, local communities and local and international students requires such a shift and a rebalancing - A recognition of, and shift from, the false dichotomy of vocational and academic learning (Bond and Wilson 2000, Tynjala et al 2003); and a more fundamental redefining and balancing of the civic and economic purposes of HE.

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