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14th August 2009

A Longitudinal Impact Study of the North West Higher Level Skills Partnership

Executive Summary

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● DEVELOPMENT & TRAINING
● FACILITATION & SUPPORT

● RESEARCH & EVALUATION
● STRATEGY & CHANGE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The North West Higher Level Skills Partnership (NWHLSP) is one of three regional pathfinder projects funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The intention behind the pathfinders was that they would contribute towards the 'vision' of a seamless skills service for employers by linking higher education into the emergent regional infrastructures that enable employers to access education and training provision to meet their identified workforce development needs.

With a focus on the North West, the NWHLSP led by the North West Universities Association (NWUA) has brought together 14 higher education institutions (HEIs), with the Association of Colleges, the North West Provider Network, the Sector Skills Councils, Government Office for the North West (GONW), the North West Regional Development Agency (NWDA), Business Link North West (BLNW), the Learning & Skills Council (LSC) and the Regional Skills & Employment Board (RSEB).

Evaluating the Partnership

In mid-April 2009, NWUA commissioned The KSA Partnership to undertake an evaluation study to **clarify how and in what ways the Higher Level Skills Partnership is making a positive contribution to skills agenda in the North West**. In making this assessment the phase one study sought to ascertain the reach and depth of the Partnership's impact on the higher level skills providers and regional partners.

In delivering the study we organised the work into four phases of activity. The desk research sought to build a consolidated picture of the context, nationally and regionally, and the key drivers for change in relation to higher level skills workforce development. In addition we reviewed the NWHLSP documentation to determine the progress made.

To solicit the full breadth of experience across the higher level skills providers and partners (national and regional agencies), we used a 'light touch' web based survey to gather information quickly and easily. The response rate to the survey was 40%. In parallel to the web based survey, we undertook a wide ranging internal and external stakeholder consultation to extend the evidence base. In

total 25 interviews and one focus group were conducted across all of the stakeholder groups.

In analysing the perceptual data from the stakeholder interviews, as well as the results from the web based survey and desk research, we used a 'top of head' interpretation alongside a more systematic thematic analysis to drawn out the key messages.

Background and context

The development of higher level skills is a crucial component of delivering the ambitions for economic change and growth as indicated in the Regional Economic Strategy 2006 (RES) and skills action plan, and the incoming Single Regional Strategy for the North West.

In October 2006, the NWUA agreed funding of £4m with the HEFCE for a region-wide Higher Level Skills Pathfinder, established to embed HE in regional and sectoral workforce development strategies, to embed workforce development in HE providers' strategies, and to promote greater co-funding of HE provision by employers¹. Underpinning the delivery of the NWHLSP is a model strongly influenced by the drive to meet the demand for higher level skills in the region's key sectors and to fully integrate higher education with the Train to Gain skills brokerage service delivered by BLNW.

A significant proportion of the HEFCE and additional £4.3m agreed by NWDA in March 2009 has supported the development of new HE provision designed to meet the needs of employers operating in the region's key growth sectors – advanced engineering and materials, biomedical, business and professional services, creative and digital industries, energy and environmental technologies, and food and drink. In addition, the key employment sector of construction was prioritised.

Alongside the NWHLSP, there are other HE structures and activities operating across the region, often at a sub-regional level, which have the potential to meet the higher level skills needs of employers and their employees. These include other HEFCE funded developments.

¹ During the preparation of the SDF business plan the concept of 'co-funding' from HEFCE's perspective had not been clarified – the concept was therefore interpreted by the North West as being 'to test the levels of funding employers were prepared to contribute'.

Evaluation findings

Key challenges

Establishing the NWHLSP, as with the two other HLSPs in the North East and South West, has not been without its challenges. The key challenges have included:

- Dealing with a broad and increasingly complex landscape with relatively modest resources – a landscape covering everything from influencing regional strategy on higher level skills to securing positive action from a diverse HE system in designing and delivering new provision to meet identified employers' needs
- Realising cultural change through influence not control – the plural nature of the HE and FE sectors, and the relative autonomy of the individual institutions, has meant that a strategy of influence and engagement has had to be adopted
- Responding to a changing policy and funding environment – when the Partnership was first conceived, the HE sector was benefiting from increased funding in real terms and the availability of significant numbers of fully funded Additional Student Numbers to support growth but this situation has drastically changed.

Key achievements

Notwithstanding these challenges, the NWHLSP has had some notable successes over its first phase of development. The Partnership's key achievements include:

- Securing strong working relationships with regional partner agencies to the extent that higher education in the North West is seen as an active contributor to the skills agenda
- Putting in place mechanisms to support the handling of higher level skills referrals between BLNW and the higher education sector
- Developing 34 new demand-led courses across 28 development projects led by 10 universities and four FE colleges and while the majority of the provision leads to a recognised HE qualification at Level 5 to 7, individual accredited units are being made available on a more flexible basis.

Key findings

Overall, the contribution and impact of the NWHLSP has been significant. Higher and further education providers have:

- Reaffirmed, reinvigorated or prioritised higher level skills workforce development as an integral part of their forward strategy, yet there is still some way to go before their response is fully embedded in the institutions' operations and cultures
- A better understanding of what it means to be 'demand-led' and have used the development funds to mitigate an element of the risk involved but ultimately a sustainable funding model is required to ensure providers embed demand-led approaches in their ways of working
- Taken positive action in developing a range of new (and in many cases flexible) accredited provision, with different entry and exit points, to meet identified higher level skills needs of employers and their employees in the region's key sectors
- Strengthened their capacity and capability to respond to identified employer needs, albeit in focused areas of academic expertise.

The NWHLSP has also added value to the higher education sector and region more broadly through:

- The recognition by regional partner agencies of the importance of higher level skills to the region and willingness to take joint action on key areas of activity
- The 'full' integration of the higher education sector in the region's skills infrastructure which has led to synergies being created with other programmes of investment at a regional and sub-regional level
- The strategic commissioning of new demand-led provision informed by more accessible (and better) intelligence on the higher level skills needs in the region's key sectors.

There is, however, evidence to suggest that 'additionality' has been more limited in extent. For instance, employer demand has been built on existing and in some cases well established relationships. There is also growing concern, particularly amongst providers, that unless the 'employer responsive' funding model for HE is clarified and restrictions on growth in student numbers lifted then providers will either have to displace existing activity or more likely reduce the emphasis they place on higher level skills workforce development.

Moving forward

The foundations for success are now in place, the challenge for the region is to **ensure sustained and co-ordinated action to maximise movement and scale-up activity through stimulating demand from employers and embedding ‘employer responsiveness’ in the operations and cultures of institutions.** We would therefore suggest that in moving forward the Partnership focuses its energies on:

- Clarifying the Partnership’s strategic intent and purpose to ensure that it achieves and sustains a position of strength
- Sustaining a co-ordinated response to higher level skills workforce development as a strategic priority for the region
- Stimulating employer demand through a sustained and co-ordinated sector oriented approach
- Continuing to strengthen the links with Business Link and Train to Gain to ensure timely and effective higher level skills referrals to providers in the region
- Incentivising providers to respond in a timely manner to the identified higher level skills needs of the region’s key sectors and employers
- Continuing to work with DBIS, HEFCE, NWDA and the LSC (and its successor bodies) to ensure funding to support higher level skills workforce development is strategically deployed.

This report was commissioned by the North West Universities Association and funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the North West Regional Development Agency.

