

Higher Level Skills Pathfinder Developing Effective Employer / Practitioner Engagement

The following document attempts to outline some key approaches / suggestions for HEIs / FECs to consider when developing employer relationships and bids to the Pathfinder for development funding. This has largely grown out of a number of suggestions made through the HLSP Creative and Digital Industries Sector Panel and informed by other relevant strategy / research.

Applicants for HLSP development funding should demonstrate:

- Use of Sector Skills Council research. All of the SSCs are at different stages in terms of their organisational growth and sector skills agreements. However, they all have a body of research based on direct contact with employers which should be referenced. In addition, direct contact with SSC representatives will evidence a useful dialogue and will help to refine your knowledge and understanding of sub-sector / regional variations of need.
- Use of/engagement with clusters/trade associations. Applications will be strengthened by providing evidence of meaningful dialogue with sub-sector / sub-regional agencies that can provide additional local intelligence and routes into the development of direct employer contacts
- Direct contact with employers. Applicants need to show that a process of dialogue has begun with relevant employers. This dialogue will be informed by SSC research and should seek to establish the scale and specificity of the employers' skills need in relation to identified 'learner' target audience.
- Development/design/delivery/evaluation. Employers should be encouraged and supported to engage with these activities. What kind of incentives can be offered? How will employers 'buy in' to this process? It is also important to stress that any employer activity which contributes to the development of new provision should be fully costed and included in the overall budget, itemised as an 'in-kind' amount.
- Institutions should also note that due to the HEFCE requirements for Pathfinder funding direct payments to employers to sit on advisory groups cannot be made with development funding. Institutions need to consider how they can support employers and incentivise involvement through alternative means / funding.

HEFCE Strategy

Institutions may also want to consider and reference the HEFCE strategy on employer engagement, particularly the section entitled 'engaging employers with higher education'. This section outlines some key areas of consideration, including:

- Quality assurance systems which apply to HE provision are fit for purpose.

- Vocational and work-based learning is valued and supported by providers.
- Academic staff have opportunities to update and refresh their knowledge of industry and the world of work.
- There are clearer routes to enter HE for learners from non-traditional backgrounds.
- Credits and qualifications systems enable learners to learn and accumulate qualifications in a flexible way that fits with their work and broader life commitments.

The strategy also suggests:

- Clearer presentation of the costs of HE programmes to help employer's source programmes which meet their needs for general business skills and specialist knowledge.
- Offering opportunities for workforce development, such as:
 - work-based learning
 - e-learning
 - short courses
 - flexible delivery at the workplace
 - accreditation of prior learning
 - accreditation of experiential learning
 - accreditation of companies' in-house training programmes

Employer Engagement : HE for the Workforce

In 'Employer Engagement : HE for the Workforce', a report commissioned by the DfES, Dr. Marilyn Wedgwood highlights a number of factors which institutions may also wish to consider:

- The report suggests that " 'value' is the critical factor for engaging employers and employees, combined with accessibility, flexibility and responsiveness in HE institutions". Further, the report also suggests that 'value' is "rarely articulated well and the impacts on the bottom line of the intangible assets of employee education and training are far from clear."
- Models of teaching and learning "must be accessible, flexible, integrated and responsive, and embrace all aspects: the content of courses; the way they are delivered, assessed, validated and accredited; the student support system; the involvement of the employer and company or public sector organisation; the administration; and the marketing, costing and pricing."

- “Excellent communication is critical, as are very good relationships. Time and again in the study, examples of success were cited when an HEI and employer were in direct dialogue with each other.” In addition the report states that “successful dialogue results when each understands the other’s business and drivers, and when there is a common language and ‘value frame’ that recognises the value of acquiring knowledge as well as skills and the value of intellectual development as well as competency in occupational skills.”
- “It is clear that HEIs must adopt a more commercial approach with better customer care processes that lead to longer term, more sustainable relationships with employers, where the complementary roles are understood.”
- “Amongst the employers an increasing ability to define job roles and competencies helps inform both the content and the delivery of learning pathways for their employees.” This suggests that institutions may need to consider strategies for training needs analysis as part of their evolving engagement activity.
- “Higher Education is more than skills training. It is also about education and knowledge. The ‘connect’ with the ‘academy’ provides an intellectual context and environment for thinking and learning in the workplace, and a rigour and objectivity from which new insights, understanding and creativity can arise.” This links to earlier observations about value and suggests that institutions need to stress this characteristic of working with the HE sector.
- “The most significant thing employers seek is value for money. They want a return on their investment wherever it is and to be able to identify and define it. If HE is to provide learning and training services products then employers want from HE impacts on productivity and performance and a commercial business-like approach. Currently this is not as generally available as they would want.”

In an appendix to the report there is a section on ‘the culture of employer engagement’ which includes some suggestions for the key components of learning programmes within this context:

The agenda is about building higher level capability in HE to manage the market volatility to generate income. It is about building well-informed markets amongst employers and the workforce.

HE must have a business ‘culture’ which can address the particular needs of the workforce market, commercial acumen, and a culture and ‘operating’ environment which encourages employer engagement.

The critical components of that culture are accessibility, responsiveness and flexibility. This emergent culture is a specialist culture requiring new skills, new approaches and new attitudes as well as development time and resources.

The text below aims to identify some of the components of the culture needed.

The Learning Programmes

Relevant, contextual learning combining the 'service needs' of employers with the rigour and objectivity of academe.

- *Using 52 weeks of the year for delivery*
- *Courses starting at any time of the year*
- *Enabling the transfer and accumulation of academic credits*
- *Making HE staff managers of learners/learning accounts*
- *Making employers associate lectures*
- *Focusing on the individual learner*
- *Having work mentors*
- *Delivering learning in the workplace*
- *Blended learning,*
- *APEL (accrediting prior experience and learning)*
- *Accredited WBL (work based learning)*
- *Work based teaching and assessment*
- *Distance learning are critical components*
- *Range of different products and services at different prices to meet different requirements.*
- *Inter-disciplinary content - it is 'driven' by the work roles and gaps in knowledge and competency, rather than by academic subject disciplines.*
- *The linking of HE courses with continuous professional development and career planning and promotion.*
- *Multi-site delivery*
- *Incorporating the workplace and company staff learning centres.*
- *A network of learning mentors and assessors which includes staff in the workplace*
- *Workplace supporters of learning acquire licence to practice through learning credits of a PCGE (post graduate certificate of education).*

References

Employer Engagement: HE for the Workforce
Dr. Marilyn Wedgwood
DfES, 2007

<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/learningafterleitch/downloads/DfES%20Report.DOC>

HEFCE strategy for employer engagement

HEFCE, 2006

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/employer/strat/>