

Learning Partnerships: The key to skilled workforces

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Abstract

The Leitch report (Dec. 2006) has provided the hard facts and figures that underpin the escalating role of Higher Education in engaging with employers to raise the skill levels of our workforce. To achieve the targets set for 2020, 38% of the working age population will be qualified to level 4. Set in the context that 50-65 year olds will account for 60% of the growth in this population, it is clear that this can only be achieved by providing learning opportunities in the workplace. Increasingly the public sector are developing frameworks setting out qualification requirements for specific levels of responsibility including the skills escalator developed in the NHS and the early years framework responding to Every Child Matters (autumn 2003). In 2005 in response to the Government's police reform and modernisation agenda the Home Office required each Police Force to develop a local Initial Police Learning and development Programme (IPLDP). In 2005 the University of Teesside formed a partnership with Cleveland Police Force to design and deliver a Foundation Degree in Police Studies. This must be successfully completed by all newly recruited police officers. In 2006 another police partnership was forged with West Mercia Constabulary and the Foundation Degree in Professional Policing launched for all new recruits. These programmes are delivered by academic staff and police trainers in a local setting and include a maximum of 34 weeks classroom learning with the remaining time spent in police tutor units undertaking police practice.

Introduction

The shape of Higher Education (HE) has been changing for over a decade with a growing emphasis on widening participation driven by changes in government policy and a range of funding initiatives introduced to support this agenda. Post Leitch (December 2006) Universities are facing a compelling obligation to address the skills agenda for employers and employees, considering how to contribute to the up-skilling of the work force and hence the nation. Arguably HE has always played a significant role in preparing a skilled workforce, producing graduates with transferable skills that should enhance their performance in the workforce and also contributing to the body of knowledge and innovation securing our nation as a global power. However, the targets set by Leitch (2006) cannot be achieved if Universities do not become more employer facing with flexible, bespoke curricula and respond to the challenge to become 'fully demand-led', although some might argue that this is contra to the philosophy of Higher Education.

The Leitch report (2006) has provided the hard facts and figures that underpin the escalating role of Higher Education in engaging with employers in order to raise the skill levels of the workforce. To achieve the targets set for 2020, thirty eight percent of the working age population will need to be qualified to HE level four. Set in the context that 50-65 year olds will account for sixty percent and more than seventy percent of the workforce for 2020 are already post sixteen, it is clear that this can only be achieved by providing learning for those in employment and to achieve this, opportunities in the workplace.

Equally the government expect employers to recognise the importance of skill development and provide opportunities for their workforce to participate in personal development and increasingly to contribute to the cost of this. The public sector are developing frameworks setting out qualification requirements for specific levels of responsibility, including the Knowledge and Skills framework developed as part of the NHS Agenda for Change (2004) and the Early Years framework responding to Every Child Matters (2003). These frameworks are essentially developed around formalised well-established qualifications for example, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ's) and traditional under-graduate and post-graduate programmes. However, it is well recognised that many of the existing qualifications are not specific to employer need and are often inaccessible for those in the workplace. In addition many employers offer well-established and tailored in-house development that provides appropriate support, but does not have any formal recognition or transferability. NESTA (2006) stressed the need to retain the richness of these learning experiences whilst trying to move towards a more formalised system.

Partnership Working: A Case Study

This paper sets out a case study demonstrating how a partnership can be developed with an employer in the public sector meeting the employer's needs whilst retaining academic integrity and drawing on the strengths of both organisations, potentially making a real contribution to the Leitch agenda if applied more broadly. In 2002 an inspection of police training (HMIC) called for a change in the delivery methods of initial police training, suggesting that it should no longer be delivered in a locality remote from where the officers would eventually be

based. This was followed by the Government's police reform and modernisation agenda as a result of which the Home Office required each Police force to develop a local Initial Police Learning and development Programme (IPLDP). Although not clarified at that time the minimum level for this training has been identified as NVQ level 3 and the training has been developed around a set of National Occupational Standards (NOS).

To support local implementation of this initiative, in 2004 the University of Teesside formed a partnership with Cleveland Police. The force has over 2,700 police and civilian employees, which through an ethos of "putting people first" aims to be amongst the top police forces by 2010 (Cleveland Police 2007). A Foundation Degree in Police Studies was designed for the delivery of IPLDP, the first nationally to be introduced for this purpose and one of the five pilot studies for the Home Office in rolling out these new localised arrangements for initial police training. (See Evaluation by ALI 2005). Subsequently in 2005 the University agreed a partnership with West Mercia Constabulary, which of the 43 police forces across England and Wales is amongst the top performing (West Mercia Constabulary 2007) and in April 2006 launched the Foundation Degree in Professional Policing for all their new police officer recruits. The programme is delivered locally on two sites, ensuring equal access for the north and south of the region, by police trainers and academics of the University of Teesside based in West Mercia. The different titles of the foundation degrees reflect the underpinning philosophy of this provision that is focused upon bespoke programmes responding to local need and demand. Both programmes achieve the same NOS, but are designed and delivered by teams from the respective police organisations and the University, drawing upon the expertise of the staff and their preferred delivery modes and styles.

A partnership on this scale requires ownership at all levels and proactive engagement to ensure its success. The programmes are managed at a micro-level by module leaders, programme team etc. and are managed through standard University quality models including Programme Boards. The police have an appointed Inspector to oversee and manage the police trainers and the implementation of the programme, working in conjunction with a University Principal lecturer, leading the academic team. However, there is also a management steering group that takes a strategic over-view and manages the partnership including representation of the Chief Constable and the relevant Dean from the University. In addition informal meetings are held on a regular basis of senior management representatives and can include personnel, training departments etc. Open and transparent communication is the key to success particularly recognising that organisations have their own vocabulary, rules, regulations and procedures and steps have to be taken to ensure that there is clarity of the application of these in a range of circumstances.

Smith and Smith (2007) refer to the importance of the engagement and participation of all stakeholders in implementing training frameworks. For public sector organisations the stakeholders are wide-reaching and we have discovered the importance of promoting buy-in to a scheme such as this which is effectively demanding a huge culture shift. Previously newly recruited police officers went to a training School for 12 weeks and were then 'on the job' for the remaining period of their two year probationary period. The implications of this for the new approach to training include the fact that new officers are unavailable to their shift for 34 weeks during their two years of training. Perceptions are that this is costly in terms of working time lost and also the cost of participation in Higher Education. The requirement to support probationers when undertaking supervised duty encouraging reflection and articulation of their learning experiences and responding to searching and critical questions is challenging, potentially threatening and again time-consuming. Of course these are merely perceptions and the long term value of the foundation degree, both in terms of quality and cost-effectiveness has yet to be fully realised, but is already evident. From the outset of these partnerships a dialogue has taken place through for example road shows, presentations, visits to the learning environment and meetings with District Commanders, Police mentors, Police Authority and the Federation. Extended engagement has also included representatives of the Judiciary and the Crown Prosecution Service. The breadth of stakeholders and the liaison required should not be under-estimated if projects such as this are to be implemented for the long-term, further enhanced and accepted as standard practice.

Both of these programmes are delivered by a joint team of academic staff and police trainers in a local setting. The two year Foundation Degree programmes are taught across a maximum of 34 weeks of 'formal' learning spread throughout the two years, with the remaining time spent in police tutor units undertaking operational policing practice. A range of teaching methods are used including joint lectures, seminars and workshops with academic and police training staff working together to facilitate these sessions. Role plays are a major feature of the learning on campus in the mock police station, courtroom and crime scene facilities, along with role plays in the

community (such as in a retail park). Assessment for the student officers' knowledge, understanding and skills is regular and ongoing throughout the two years. For example, the acquisition of knowledge of criminal law and its application is assessed by examination and assignments are set which examine the impact on contemporary policing of the McPherson Report first published in 1999 that concluded there was institutional racism and professional incompetence within the police. The Student Officer Learning and Assessment Portfolio (SOLAP) is used to track the student police officers' ability to perform tasks in the workplace and reflect on their ability. The programmes are designed to fully respond to the Home Office NOS requirements and in incorporating a significant proportion of work-based learning, flexible approaches to learning and teaching and direct involvement of the employer in the delivery address the issues raised by Besley about foundation degrees in a policy briefing 2005. Both Police forces require the successful completion of the foundation degree for full progression into the force, demonstrating their perceptions of the validity of the course in fulfilling the requirements for police training.

Developing CPD Frameworks

NESTA (2006) in responding to Leitch highlighted the importance of lifelong learning and the need to harness in individuals the continued ability and confidence to learn after their initial training if we are really going to impact on the UK's capacity for innovation. Addressing this and also recognising the importance of creating a 'learning organisation', a notion embraced by both Cleveland Police and West Mercia Constabulary, the partnerships have begun to develop Continuing Professional Development (CPD) frameworks, including recognised qualifications for serving officers and the wider police family. These provide opportunities for all staff to participate in accredited learning through a range of mechanisms including, accredited in-house learning, bespoke courses, accredited prior experiential learning (APEL), work-based learning and access to a variety of related undergraduate and post-graduate programmes at the University including credits achieved from the breadth of learning opportunities listed. For example Special Constables and Police Community Support Officers (PCSO's) in undertaking their initial training participate in learning and assessment that is recognised with 30 credits at level 4 which equate to a University Certificate in Professional Development and also if they join the regular police officers, these certificated programmes allow a limited amount of Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) against the Foundation degree. A framework such as this also provides opportunities for existing police officers who traditionally retire at a relatively young age and commonly seek to progress to a second career but without formally recognised skills and knowledge that can readily be transferred to another setting.

The Police Force is one of the last professional groups to move towards a level 4 qualification for entry to the profession, although it is currently undergoing a major transformation of the development of its staff as set out in the National Workforce Modernisation Programme (2005). If this approach were adopted nationwide it would make a major contribution to the achievement of Leitch's targets. Currently there are 55 police forces in the United Kingdom each recruiting approximately 100-150 new recruits annually and additionally a number of specialist law enforcement agencies with annual recruitment cycles. If CPD is established more widely opportunity for achieving skills at level 4 will be extended to: 159,000 police officers, 70,000 civilian staff, 13,000 special constables and up to 25,000 PCSO's and wardens by 07/08 (National policing plan 05-08). This model reflects that adopted by the NHS in many ways and this has been shown to have a significant impact on the development of new ways of working and career progression. Most Universities incorporate Faculties of Health and a range of courses for NHS staff. We propose that this approach for the Police Force would enhance the police profession, raise the skill levels of the force and forge a strong partnership between the Home Office and Higher Education. As the police family nationally continues to grow the opportunities for Higher Education to be embedded in the workplace, along with the associated benefits for not only career long but life long learning for police personnel, whatever their role, continues to expand.

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