Title: The role of Partnership and Informal Learning in HE Workplace Engagement

For the Higher Education (HE) sector the world of work and our engagement with the workplace has been "troublesome". The political challenge laid down by UK government (DfES 2003) and those within the "Celtic Nations" is one where HE is required to be more responsive to the needs of the workplace. Often those "needs" are seen as being around the skills (e.g. Scottish Government 2008) or attributes a graduate needs (e.g. Hounsell 2011), or they focus on particular subject areas (e.g. Science and Engineering Education Advisory Group 2012). Clearly these measures of value are important to HE's role.

Often these values are understood in relation to people who are studying full time on a campus and are on route to the workplace. Open and distance learning destabilises that narrative. At the Open University in Scotland over 70% of our students are in work already, they are studying part-time, often over long periods of time, sometimes for to move on, sometimes to move up, and sometimes for very personal reasons. Here ideas around workplace learning being *at, for* or *through* (Brennan *et.al* 2006) work are far less clear. In this paper we explore those challenges and tensions using examples from our engagement with the workplace in two very different contexts.

The first example is from an large engineering firm. A firm with which we have a "traditional" business to business relationship through our MBA programme. What is different about this relationship is that it grew out of a Trade Union led initiative to explore learning needs in the workplace. Unlike many work based learning models, where we have an employer, the student and the academy, the tripartite is disrupted by the TU. The TU provides a different kind of access in the workplace, access to different kinds of students (these are skilled craftsmen who were deemed "skilled enough" by their employer), and the opportunities to offer different kinds of support in the workplace (direct from TU learning representatives and the fostering of peer learning in the workplace). This is a long term project that has been evaluated and disseminated (ref) since its inception. As the programme moves into its 3rd year we have begun to review our position, and perhaps question some of our early research. In this paper we look at the themes that have informed our work, looking at widening access in STEM subjects, peer learning, and partnership itself. We also present some of the questions that are emerging from our most recent evaluation, around the tensions between the goals of different partners, and about collective learning and individuals goals and aspirations.

The second example is from a partnership with a third sector environment organisation. The organisation supports community renewables projects on behalf of the Scottish Government. This partnership arose out a strategic review of the OU in Scotland's places in the renewable energy landscape. Our initial work has been on developing a suite of online Open Educational Resources (OER, education resources that are licensed for use and reuse – see McGill *et.al* 2011) aimed at community groups and volunteers who are looking to improve the energy efficiency of community buildings. These are volunteers, here learning and work is somewhat different. Developing OER for informal learning by volunteers requires us to think about the relationship between work and HE differently. Developing OER with a partner organisation has meant content from the sector, and a curriculum that fits the needs of the sector. This privileged access is a result of our development of non accredited OER. Our openness has convinced our partner to be open. The partnership also requires us to think about the value of HE engagement with the workplace in different ways. That perhaps our engagement with work is not just about paid work. That perhaps we need to think about wider measures of value (like social and ecological benefits), That perhaps openness might be a solution to developing curriculum that meets the needs of Scottish society.

While very different these two examples of our work are answers to similar questions. Questions

around the relevance of HE to work, questions over what we mean by work, questions around how we develop curriculum and content to meet the needs of employers *and* employees within a sector, questions about the role (and the limits) of partnership, and questions about the value of HE study, and of our own value as educators.

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