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**The employers' challenge: extending the boundaries of knowledge through work-based learning(0184)**

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

Universities in 2010 face a growing raft of pressures, including the demands of producing graduates with the types of skills required by an ever-changing workplace. Willetts (2010) has challenged higher education institutions to detail how they prepare students for the transition into the workplace. This paper relates to a further challenge to universities from employers, suggesting the need for widening concepts of knowledge for students already in the workplace. New programmes have recently been developed in areas which have an inter-disciplinary curriculum dictated by a professional body yet still require a significant part of undergraduate study to be undertaken through work-based learning. However, employers identified that different kinds of work knowledge was needed for this future workforce. Utilising data drawn from focus groups with recent graduates and filmed interviews with employers, this study seeks to understand how the boundaries of knowledge are being extended in one work-based learning context.

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Universities in 2010 face a growing raft of pressures, including the demands of producing graduates with the types of 'employability' skills required by an ever-changing workplace. Willetts (2010) has challenged higher education institutions to detail how they prepare students for the transition into the workplace. This arguably poses a number of demands on institutions. It raises the debate about the concept of 'employability' within the academy and its place within the curriculum itself. It challenges the notion that experiential learning demonstrates the 'acquisition of useful knowledge and the development of a wide range of relevant skills' (Helyer, 2010: xv). It also raises questions about the expanding role of skills and 'knowledge' within the concept of employability and the expanding skills and knowledge that students must have in order to articulate these coherently in order to ease the transition into and to operate within the workplace (Kumar, 2007).

This paper relates to a further challenge presented to universities from employers, suggesting the need for widening concepts of knowledge for students already in the workplace. This case study

concerns the development of a suite of interconnected awards in a STEM area, where an interdisciplinary curriculum is dictated by a professional body yet still requires a significant part of undergraduate study to be undertaken through work-based learning. However, employers identified that different kinds of work knowledge were needed for the future workforce. Utilising data drawn from focus groups with recent graduates and filmed interviews with employers, this study seeks to understand how the boundaries of knowledge are being extended in one work-based learning context.

Environmental Health has been identified as an area of occupational skills shortage for since the mid 1990s and the background to the decline in entrants to degree courses (Gaber and Wardle, 2002) and recruitment shortages (Lewis, 2008) have been well documented. The most recent workforce surveys show that whilst the recruitment difficulties for have eased in recent years, from 58% (2006)<sup>1</sup>, 40% (2008)<sup>2</sup>, and 35% (2009)<sup>3</sup>, it is still one of the top five areas for skills shortages.

The professional body prescribes a detailed core curriculum. Professional registration as an Environmental Health Practitioner (EHP) follows on from the academic study via the completion of professional examinations, which includes a Professional Interview and Experiential Learning Portfolio. Work-based learning opportunities, traditionally provided by Local Authorities, are an essential part of underpinning the academic studies within the curriculum. However, the traditional model of offering work-based learning has been challenged by employers due to new competency frameworks and an expressed view that the established system of work-based learning does not allow for the development of a widening base of work-knowledge.

A small-scale case study was undertaken during the development of one suite of new awards. Focus groups were held with recent graduates who had been working in the relevant employment area for between two and four years. Drawn from six different local authority employers, each participant had been to a different university and covered a cross-section of routes through into employment, from HND to Masters degree holders. The purpose of the groups was to uncover some of the factors that, on reflection, had proved beneficial to the graduates and also what were felt to be some of the challenges within the work-based learning components of their respective programmes. As a follow-on question, it was wanted to know how these factors had shaped their subsequent career path.

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<sup>1</sup> *Local Government Pay and Workforce Strategy Survey 2006*. LGA, IDeA & LGE

<sup>2</sup> *Local Government Pay and Workforce Survey 2008*. LGA, IDeA & LGE

<sup>3</sup> *Local Government Workforce Survey 2009*. LGA, IDeA & LGE

Filmed expert interviews were held with a range of local authority heads of service and directors of private organisations operating in comparable areas. The interviews were semi-structured and related to the following main areas: (1) what they valued most and least about graduate attributes in a rapidly changing environment, (2) their experience of working with employees undertaking work-based learning programmes or elements of programmes and the skills and knowledge acquisition implicit in this (3) the challenges of the traditional approach to work-based learning in this particular employment area (4) the widening approaches to work-knowledge that they felt should be accessible from work-based learning, again to support a rapidly changing environment.

The focus groups and the interviews were subjected to content analysis, with coding of initial concepts being made to capture the meaning of specific statements made by participants. Data were examined to look for possible connections and contradictions. The data drawn from both the focus groups and the filmed interviews allowed for a deeper understanding of both the personal and contextual factors that had influenced both the employers and the former students. The data also revealed the points of convergence and divergence in the thinking of the two groups, but above all, it revealed a call for changing practice where the approach to work-based learning was concerned.

The many differing definitions and contexts of work-based learning have to acknowledge and as well as the differing knowledge cultures of the university and the workplace. As Eraut (2004) identifies, workplace performance typically integrates several different forms of knowledge and skills but it must be argued that so does higher education. However, Eraut (ibid) further identifies the key differentiating factor as being that of being afforded the time to engage in higher education study with an analytic and deliberative approach.

Yet in this case, what the employers were seeking for their employees was just that. Context and setting is socially constructed (Wenger, 1998) and correspondingly in this study, what the employers wanted was to be able to assert a much greater cultural influence on the learning environment. This then raised the question as to what types of knowledge the employers believed to be being engendered by the traditional work-based learning approach, and how they sought to influence the construction of something different, a form of innovation in work-based knowledge in a rapidly changing world (Nixon, 2008). The implications have had significant impact on the development of one approach to an employer-led curriculum and in particular to the context of work-based learning within that.

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