

Working group: Management of Change - Meeting Sheffield Hallam Students Union, 24th October

Meeting report

Background

The Engage project team have four working groups, one of which is focusing on 'Management of Change' issues. This subgroup is looking at the need for communication between employers, educators, trainers, assessors and brokers, if these groups are to truly work in partnership with each other. As part of this work, the management of change group invited academics, employers and other key stakeholders to an event to discuss the topic in order to raise any issues and to share experience of Employer-Higher Education engagement.

The event was particularly advertised to draw attendance from:

- * Employers who have experience of working with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)
- * Academics who have experience of working with employers (including placement tutors etc)
- * Employers who have not worked with HEIs or might consider doing so for mutual benefits
- * Academics not working with employers or might consider doing so for mutual benefits
- * Other key people who have related interests in working with HEIs or employers

Format of event

The day was arranged to provide three introductory talks to set the scene for the meeting, followed by group discussions. The first talk was a joint presentation by Tim Mulroy from Sheffield Hallam University and Sarah Bardell from Network Rail. They discussed how their partnership had developed to offer students accredited courses that would not only offer excellent prospects of jobs in the rail industry but also ensure skills development within the industry. The second talk was by Richard Brown from Bradford College, giving a Further Education perspective of engaging with employers. The third talk was from John Wilcox representing Bodycote, giving an employer's perspective.

After the talks the delegates were divided into two groups to discuss two questions; the first to discuss barriers to change in academic/employer engagement. After discussing this question the groups were mixed again to discuss possible solutions to these barriers. The intention for asking two direct questions was to provide informed issues based on real examples and experiences from the key stakeholders present at the meeting.

Engage workshop agenda

Wednesday 24th October 2007
Sheffield Hallam University
Hallam Students Union – Pod B

- 10.00 Arrival and coffee
- 10.30 **Introduction;**
The Engage project; the landscape in business and academia.
- 10.50 **Engagement – some insights**
Three short presentations illustrating experiences in employer/academic links and interactions.
- Network Rail and Sheffield Hallam University
 - Bradford College
 - Bodycote Testing
- 11.45 **Discussion groups:** the engagement experience: demands, barriers, solutions
- 12.30 **Report back**
- 12.45 **The way forward**
- 13.00 Lunch and depart.



What do you think the barriers are to employer /academic engagement? Please focus on those aspects that relate to organisation and communication.

Notes from scribe 1

Employers want a course but can't provide students.

Students want courses that interest them, not courses that necessarily lead to jobs.

HEI motivation to engage with employers isn't necessarily a driver – RAE affects motivation too.

FE has a different culture with regard to employers.

HEI timetables don't match employer times to collaborate.

Mismatch between pre and post '92 Universities.

Funding mechanisms for FE/HE don't help.

FE/HE have slightly different markets so can collaborate more if supported e.g. not in competition.

Project money to support this work doesn't go far.

Employers switching allegiances with HEIs is a risk i.e. move support from one HEI to another.

HEI short term contracts put HEI/employer relationships at risk – short termism. This can result in a lack of continuity for courses, student provision and support for employers.

How can HEIs deal with so many SMEs to support their work.

Notes from scribe 2

Demands

Language.

Intermediaries – business development/support.

Cost effective.

Too many confusing offers – features/benefits.

Lowering of standards, students and accreditation.

3rd stream activity, business and community.

Sustainability. Risk/full economic costing models.

Project funding, not long term.

Academic competition.

Government support or incentives.

Notes from scribe 3

Academic:

Money and time.

HEI more concerned with research for example.

Continuity, long term required by HEIs.

Employers:

Not producing graduates with right skills.

Who does employer talk to in HEI.

Funding issues.

Notes from scribe 4

Lack of STEM graduates – 9% year on year decline in numbers.

Difficult to recruit graduates with correct skill profile.

Move towards recruitment from selection.

Shortage of metallurgists – training materials science graduates.

Local university not offering right training, have to do it in-house.

Graduates lacking in practical skills (lab work etc) & not prepared to learn.

Reluctance of HEI to alter course content.

Student desire to have £20 k jobs straight from Uni.

What goes in to a course doesn't appear to meet demand.

Difficult to know who to contact within institutions to change current situation.

Are there funding issues with the HEI?

Cost of courses prohibitive for small businesses to sponsor students.

Need for more events like this so that both sides can meet.

Can you suggest solutions to those barriers identified?

Notes from scribe 1

Don't rely on one employer to fill your course.

Need to inform employers what is available. FDF (Foundation Degree Forward) can also help.

Employers can 'advertise' courses to other employers.

Reduce impression of 'competition' between employers.

SMEs might not have funding to develop links/courses with HEIs. Suppliers (e.g. equipment) from larger organisations could support training courses e.g. courses run regionally. SMEs could then involve their staff and send students (or staff for skills training) to larger organisations where numbers would then be more viable.

Give more flexibility to give credits to employers from HEIs. Attendees could get CPD credits, which run alongside normal modules for employers.

Employers want staff trained in the workplace, so why can't HEIs go into the workplace rather than always the other way around? As above, one employer could also allow SMEs to undertake the same training.

Competitors – if there is a universal shortfall in training/skills, competition won't be an issue i.e. it doesn't matter which employees from which company are developing skills, the industry as a whole will benefit.

To allow change it must be led from the top.

Develop clusters of employers to get them working together.

Help employers realise that if they lost a newly trained employee to a competitor, those skills are still being kept in the industry.

How do we promote the fact that there is an employer need for skills through courses i.e. there's a job waiting for you when you complete your training (or course)? How do we make the science industry more relevant and exciting to students since students often have to specialise too early?

Notes from scribe 2

Tools

Cost competition within industry i.e. games vs engineering vs plumbing/gas more awareness/profile.

Low attainment/reduced standards. Raise STEM (Science Technology Engineering Maths) subjects.

Recognition of cross-cutting/interdisciplinary skills.

Cluster groups for SMEs.

Curriculum development on innovation.

Notes from scribe 3

Competition between employers. Skills will remain in industry even if trained employer leaves.

Reducing risks to both sides (funding?)

Specialisation at too early an age for new graduates.

Personal links important! But continuity?

Interchange: employer – HEIs HEIs – employers (lecturers etc)

European models – graduating at a later age

Additional notes from scribe 4

It would appear that the examples of engagement have resulted from personal contacts (Network Rail/SHU) or an individual being pro-active (Richard Brown). In the second discussion group, Richard admitted that if he left Bradford College, the course would probably fall through. Much of the second discussion group's considerations relating to solutions were concerned with managing risk for both HEIs and employers and this related to funding and continuity and lack of knowledge of what was required. There was also discussion on whether one can, or should, try to influence more the subjects taken by new university (and college) students. It was pointed out that students don't graduate in Europe until about 23-24 years old and possibly postgraduate qualifications may be the best way of helping to implement Leitch. However HEIs and employers are of course not really "engaging" at the moment on what is needed.

With respect to future project work, there seems to be a definite need to find out exactly what industry wants from new graduates in physical sciences (and engineering if a joint bid) and whether these needs can be met in part by postgraduate training. The latter can of course be a way of upskilling the current workforce, on a part-time basis. (MSc degrees have been taken in the past by HND diplomates with industrial experience.) Such a survey could be wide-ranging covering interpersonal as well as technical skills and including industry's requirements at FD level. Recruitment consultants could play a role in this, as they seem to have a good idea of industry's needs (equipment specific skills, quality management skills etc.). The other aspect of the survey would be looking into whether HEIs (and FEIs) are able (and willing) to meet the training needs of industry. I'm not quite sure how the SSCs fit in with this, but advising HEIs on what they should be teaching is clearly a role for a Subject Centre.

Outcomes

A major outcome of this meeting was the fact that the event successfully brought together a range of key stakeholders from Higher Education, employers and other key stakeholders in promoting HE/employer engagement. This ensured that the meeting provided a rich source of experience and insight into the issues around the 'managing the change' theme. The following notes are some of the key issues highlighted during the discussions.

Barriers

Can't provide students in viable numbers.

Different drivers (e.g. RAE, quick course turn around).

Funding.

Competition between employers – but also between HEIs.

Continuity (sustainability).

SMES (funding, provision of students, contacts with).

Language (understanding each other).

Issues of standards and accreditation.

Making contact – no formal routes or process.

Lack of availability of appropriate training opportunities.

Solutions

Involve range of employers with course development/provision.

Remove misconception of competition between employers and also between HEIs.

More coordinated training opportunities for SMEs.

Flexibility of training credits/awards to suit different circumstances.

Provide formal channels of communication between employer groups and HEIs.

Demonstrate benefits of skills development (e.g. case studies, worker experiences?).

Bring SMEs together through cluster groups.

Avoid specialisation too early on.

Find out exactly what industry wants in order to try to support their needs.

Recommendations

There seem to be a wide range of key stakeholders who could support the 'managing the change' agenda. However, links between these organisations are not always clear and it would be beneficial to recognise these organisations and coordinate their contributions. It is recommended that all potential key stakeholders are identified and an overarching communication channel is created to maintain regular contact with such organisations.

Many employer and/or HEI initiatives rely on the efforts of a few dedicated and enthusiastic individuals. If these people leave post or retire the initiative is at high risk of collapse. It is recommended that such initiatives are formalised and supported appropriately so as not to rely on individuals but is integrated into the common practice of organisations.

Network Rail and Sheffield Hallam collaboration came about by chance discussions. It is recommended that a future pilot(s) is developed as an exemplar to show how collaborations can be developed through a formalised structure or organisation to put employers in touch with HE/FE and *vice versa*.

Engage Meeting

Sheffield Hallam University 24th October 2007

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