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Review of Business-University Collaboration

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on links between business and universities in the UK. In this response, I refer to examples of good collaborative practice; the relationship between research and business; attitudes to vocational qualifications; and current funding arrangements.

Examples of good collaborative practice

Examples of good collaborative practice include some stimulated by Government initiatives - most notably, perhaps, the former DfEE-sponsored *Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative*, the current *Higher Education Innovation Fund*, and the recent work of Ufi Limited. These initiatives are encouraging some universities to introduce more flexible approaches to delivery and assessment. We particularly welcome the development of work-based degrees, where learning in the workplace is formally recognised by higher education institutions – the Universities of Middlesex, Portsmouth and Surrey, for example.

The foundation degree development programme has encouraged further and higher education institutions to collaborate with a number of sector skills bodies to improve higher technical skills. The Higher Education Funding Council for England has full details, but noteworthy examples include teaching and learning support at Lancaster University and aircraft engineering (with strong industry participation) at the University of Kingston. However, it has to be noted that sectors vary, significantly in their responses to foundation degrees: some - for example, parts of the engineering sector – continuing to prefer existing qualifications such as HNDs and HNCs.

It will be important for the new employer-led sector skills councils to work closely with higher education to establish the qualifications requirements of their industries. Graduate apprenticeships have already stimulated links between some embryonic councils, businesses and universities. Some universities, however, remain reluctant to risk any element of their curriculum autonomy by close engagement with industry. It will require considerable work - possibly through the regional development agencies - if this situation is to change markedly: indeed, changes in university governance might be a necessary pre-condition in some cases.

The relationship between research and business

Significant amounts of public funding are allocated to university research – and clearly investment is important to an economy which is increasingly founded on the deployment of knowledge. Equally, it should be evident how this investment operates to the benefit of society.

One approach would see the research ratings of universities more closely aligned with business or community benefits. Clearly, however, any such change would need to be implemented sensitively in order to safeguard a suitably rich range of activity, not all of which should or could have an obvious economic pay-off – certainly in the short-term.

Attitudes to vocational qualifications

There remains prejudice against vocational qualifications across the business and university communities. Recruitment practices still often favour applicants with traditional academic qualifications, and one consequence is a downward spiral that discourages talented people with technical skills from recognising their own worth.

QCA is currently in partnership with the emerging sector skills network and the funding agencies to deliver an ambitious programme of work designed to make vocational qualifications much more responsive to the needs of employers and individuals in the workplace.

It could be that the Higher Education Funding Council, the Quality Assurance Agency and the sector skills network could similarly collaborate to ensure that those entering higher education are well informed about subsequent progression opportunities. Sector skills councils might, for example, endorse particular degrees or higher education courses with notable industry relevance

Current funding arrangements

The Higher Education Funding Council and the Learning and Skills Council have rather different approaches to funding. Colleges working with both systems therefore face some logistical problems

More fundamentally, perhaps, the current arrangements offer no incentive for universities to support work-based learning. Higher-level NVQs, for example, are not currently funded by HEFCE: their use within higher education programmes is rare in consequence. This issue was raised in the context of foundation degree developments, but it needs to be urgently addressed if work-based learning is to prosper in higher education.

I hope the observations are of some use and look forward to the fruits of your group's thinking in due course.

Sir Anthony Greener
Chairman

