

Improving the Relationship between Universities and Business

A response from Skillset, the Sector Skills Council for the Audio-Visual Sector

Introduction

Thank you for giving Skillset the opportunity to respond to the above consultation and for granting a slight extension to the deadline for responses.

We felt it was important to align our response on behalf of the industry to the response to the DfES 'The Future of Higher Education' White Paper and we attach this as a companion document as many of the issues addressed read across.

As with our response to the White Paper, Skillset has also been involved in consultation events organised by the SSDA and we refer to the response submitted by the SSDA on behalf of the Skills for Business Network. That response highlights the importance of the role of sector 'demand-side' bodies in relation to the debate around high level skills and knowledge and the need for a stronger relationship between employers, SSCs and higher education. Skillset endorses the general messages in this response.

Again, as with our response to the higher education White Paper, Skillset has concentrated on providing a sector specific context and recognising that you have specifically requested responses from individual employers, we have compiled a small sample of case studies to illustrate partnerships and relationships within our sector.

The White Paper 'The Future of Higher Education'

In response to the White paper Skillset has outlined the sector-wide debates and recommendations that now form part of our Sector Skills Council strategy in this important area.

Whilst alluding to the wider potential for partnerships between higher education and the industry, our response has concentrated on the issues that most closely related to the third set of questions in the Lambert Review – the relationship between graduate and postgraduate skills and the needs of the industry.

In summary, our response provides evidence and confirms the need for;

- an emphasis on the need for the demand side views to influence strategy, provision and funding within higher education;
- a clear vision for higher education in relation to business and for this to be articulated by strengthening the role of SSCs to inform strategy (in partnership with RDAs and other partners) in higher education;
- a particular address to media higher education and partnerships with the industry. We have recommended an approach that allows the industry to 'signpost' skills

related or vocationally related provision (as we understand that not all higher education provision has this as a primary aim);

- higher education 'sector centres of excellence' should be established in order to build effective partnerships and target industry and public funding resources to support HEI's in the most effective way;
- a thorough market assessment to support the fuller introduction of foundation degrees for our sector.

As part of our response we highlight the role that Sector Skills Councils can play in providing the coordinated demand side information and intelligence. This includes;

- the definitive source of employment data by sector and occupation, available across the UK and provided at regional level;
- current 'intelligence' on skills gaps and shortages and predicted growth and skill needs;
- job profiles, skills maps and skill specifications in the form of national occupational standards;
- sector specific careers information, advice and guidance aimed at potential entrants, new entrants and experienced professionals.

** Please do refer to the document attached for further details*

Best Practice and Examples of Excellence in Business – University Collaboration

The Lambert Review has specifically asked for individual examples of business-university collaboration and targeted the consultation at employers.

Not wishing to duplicate the information received by the review team, below are a selection of case studies from across the audio-visual sector, providing individual examples of partnership from a range of employers.

Granada – Links with Colleges of FE AND HE

Granada plc has developed a range of internal training schemes and external links with key education institutes and industry partners.

One example of this is Granada Television in Manchester, which is aware of the need to nurture local talent and facilitate strong relations with local colleges and universities. In 1996 it launched the Granada Media Education Partnership, a relationship with five colleges and training providers in the NW selected by tender. Selection criteria included relevance of course content, currency and attitudes of tutorial staff, technical facilities, student diversity and graduate employment statistics. The company provides Granada branding, structured work experience and access to industry professionals. It also gets involved in curriculum design and provides direct financial contributions to support equipment bids.

Aardman Animation and University of the West of England

With a track record spanning nearly 25 years, Bristol-based Aardman Animation is one of the UK's leading animation studios.

Aardman is only too aware of its obligations to the pool of freelance animation talent in the Bristol area. Ensuring the success of the south-west as a production centre is central to its long-term strategy. As the company operates in a highly specialised field one of the ways it has sought to ensure continuity of supply of creative talent is by working with partners. One such relationship is the Animation Training Scheme it set up in conjunction with the University of the West of England. Aardman used this innovative approach to train animators for its successful feature film debut *Chicken Run*.

Economic Development Partnerships and Skills Development: the South West

In 2001, South West Regional Development Agency, invited regional partners in an open process to come together to design and deliver a targeted skills strategy for the ICT sector rather than bidding competitively. Skillset and Screen South West - Skillset's training partner in the region – lead a broad based alliance of industry and public partners, including companies, networks, public agencies and HE and FE colleges on a 2 year skills development programme. This scheme targeted the animation and digital media sectors, and was backed by Skillset and e-skills NTO. "Training for Convergence" addressed graduate retention, skills needs across creative and technical areas and management skills for converging media.

Broadcast Technology Training: Links between Higher Education and the BBC

The Higher Education sector has for many years attempted to provide suitable vocational courses for the broadcast industry. However, a lack of funding has often led to an undue emphasis on media theory rather than media practice. BBC Training and Development recognised the value of HE courses in equipping graduates with a higher skill/knowledge level when commencing training courses. Partnerships have been established with a number of universities which have now designed new vocational courses and utilise BBC facilities to enhance existing degree programmes.

The benefits to the industry are:

- Shorter training courses;
- Guaranteed pool of talent;
- Opportunities for students to receive sponsorship from the industry;
- A higher profile for Broadcasting as a career;
- Engineers with increased skills/knowledge.

The review team is asked to note that Skillset's strategy on behalf of the industry, to coordinate the expression of skill requirements (and in agreed cases to formalise this by setting up approval arrangements) complements the arrangements and partnerships that individual employers have created. We provide the mechanism for a cross-sector and strategic approach to creating the partnerships which will be illustrated in the next section.

How can business employers better communicate their skills requirements to the university sector?

As illustrated by the case studies, individual employers are often approached to inform curriculum and course design. Whilst this is undoubtedly useful, it can mean that a single employer focus can influence a wider programme development. On a practical level HEIs often find it difficult to liaise and involve a broader range of employers.

Skillset's ability to take the views of, and communicate the perspectives of groups of employers within a sector helps to broaden out the analysis which ultimately benefits the student in their pursuit of employment more generally.

A further illustration of the importance of a sector wide demand response, is the need to analyse the different types of skill requirement, by sector, in a way that is compatible with delivery systems in the formal education sector.

A Sector Case Study

In 2000, as part of a wider review of skills needs across the audio visual industries, Skillset commissioned research¹ to look at the relationship between the skills required for the digital media industry in the South East and the role of both further education and higher education in supporting these needs.

Through the research with employers it was possible to identify a matrix of the skill requirements in the new digital media sector, ranging from industry specific 'transient' skills through to those skills that might be considered generic or transferable and 'enduring'.

In working with further and higher education it was possible to identify which skills, and which type of skill, could be delivered most appropriately by different parts of the education sector.

Employer response to the 'skills' question is likely to differ depending on;

- the 'maturity' of the sector and business; and
- the size of the employer.

Developing higher education programmes, which in turn develop the right skills for businesses, is effectively coordinated through sector bodies who can then take a wider perspective and present this information in a way that is relevant for higher education providers.

In addition to the above, and as already mentioned, through the development and implementation of a formal 'approval' and kitemarking process in certain sectors, Skillset

¹ ***Skills for the Digital Media Industry Human Capital - June 2000***

This research in itself provides a useful case study of effective sector and regional partnership. Funded by SEEDA, supported by Skillset's Regional Employer Panel and used by the UK wide review of Skills in the Audiovisual Industry – Skills for Tomorrow's Media 2001.

has been able to produce guidelines aimed at higher education to support the development of programmes (and the recognition of programmes) that will provide appropriate skills for business.

Wider Collaboration between Higher Education and Employers to Support Business Development

We recognise that the examples of best practice and our response to the White Paper relate primarily to the need for strategic coordination across sectors to underpin industry and higher education partnerships in relation to skills. As a result we have addressed some, but not all of the questions raised as part of the Lambert Review.

Supporting Creativity

The consultation makes clear that wider potential for higher education and business development is of central importance to the review.

In the creative industries, higher education can and does provide the opportunity for less tangible 'ideas' generation, for exploration of techniques and an opportunity to bring together teams of creative, technical and business expertise in the form of 'practice' based research.

As the review group may be aware, this issue is now being addressed further by the DCMS through the establishment of a Creative Industries Higher Education Forum. A particular focus on the needs of the creative industries is welcomed as much of the 'business' emphasis tends to focus on technology support.

The Forum will include representatives from Universities UK, the industry/Skillset. The three themes to be addressed are; skills, entrepreneurship and knowledge transfer.

We are hopeful that this high level forum will provide a platform for the development of ideas and proposals to support wider business partnerships between the Audio-Visual (and other sectors forming part of the creative industries) sector and higher education.

It is our understanding and expectation that this forum will also identify current barriers, as well as proposals and incentives to strengthen collaboration.

A Case Study – The UK Games Industry and Higher Education

In addition to the above, Skillset also draws attention to a piece of research commissioned by the DTI. This research provides a useful model for looking at the wider relationship between higher education and business as it provides a focus for identifying the benefits- in their fullest sense, of industry/employer higher education collaboration.

The research identifies and explores three benefits (or motivations driving collaboration in the games sector):

1. Skills development
2. Research
3. Developing business clusters

The first issue – skills development (aligning demand and supply) is covered in the previous section of this response and the higher education White Paper response.

The second theme-research, is an issue of particular relevance in the new technology related sectors such as digital media and computer games (although we would again underline the importance of ‘practice’ based research carried out by higher education in relation to film and television programme development)

In relation to the games industry however, there are now many examples of business/higher education research projects relating to new product development, and these examples (which are detailed in the report), illustrate how the strengths of higher education and commerce can be combined.

The final and major benefit in establishing partnerships is described in the report as business support and ‘business clusters’.

The case study below provides an example of this in the computer games sector;

The Scottish Games Cluster

Scotland has some long-established games software developers: DMA, VIS Entertainment, Steel Monkeys, Red Lemon, etc.

When games software shifted to 3D technology, there was a sudden need for 3D design and programming skills. Former Computer Science graduates of the University of Abertay persuaded it to develop a specialist games course to meet this need. Abertay became the first UK university to establish a games course - a BSc and MSc in Computer Games Technology.

The university now forms part of a small but well-developed games business cluster:

- The Scottish Games Alliance (SGA) provides a marketing platform for Scottish games companies and organises a joint delegation to the E3 trade show;
- Scottish Enterprise Tayside has provided support to the SGA and to companies in the area;
- Scottish games companies help with course development and have input to the syllabus at Abertay;
- Abertay’s International Centre for Computer Games and Virtual Entertainment is funded by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, Scottish Enterprise and the European Regional Development Fund;
- Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art (part of the University of Dundee) provides design graduates for the industry.

These wider collaborations provide best practise models for business and higher education partnership and without wishing to pre-empt the findings of the creative industries forum we feel that these relationships will be best fostered by an approach that focuses on 'centres of sector excellence in higher education.'