

Future Directions for Higher Education in Wales

Learning in Employment: Lessons Learnt
April 2013



future directions
for higher education in wales



cyfeiriadau'r dyfodol
ar gyfer addysg uwch yng nghymru



Introduction

In response to the Welsh Assembly Government's strategy for higher education, For our Future (*Department for Children Education Lifelong Learning and Skills, 2009*), representatives from all major higher education stakeholders agreed to a focused enhancement theme for Wales – Graduates for our Future - built around three major work strands: Learning for employment, Learning in employment and Students as partners. The work strands were officially launched in March 2011 and the three groups set about discussing how they could best capture innovation and practice from the sector. The work strands each produced a collection of case studies published by the Higher Education Academy in April 2012.

The Learning in Employment work strand agreed a definition of learning in employment that would provide sufficient scope to encompass the many activities members discussed. Our working definition was agreed as *Learning in employment is the accreditation of part of all of a student's learning programme through formal recognition of experience in the workplace*. Interest in learning through employment as a strand of higher education provision in Wales has steadily grown. The work strand membership suggested it would be useful to produce a snapshot of the lessons learned in our exploration and experience of accrediting work place learning that could be shared more widely and which might help inform future practice. This leaflet therefore captures the essential learning that colleagues throughout the HE sector in Wales have identified. The points are organised to reflect the themes presented in the companion publication 'Graduates for our Future' enhancement theme: Learning in Employment available from

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/events/academyevents/2012/Learning_In_Employment_English_200412_1237.pdf

Learner experiences

1. Students need to be made aware of the employment skills they are acquiring, regardless of whether these are delivered as stand-alone or embedded in the curriculum. With knowledge of such skills students have more confidence in communicating and negotiating placements with employers.
2. Students in employment and studying in the workplace need to have a better understanding of Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL) and how experiential learning can be translated into HE credit and accumulated.
3. Time in the workplace gives students greater self-reliance and confidence which allows them to take greater ownership of their academic and personal development and to increase their chances of finding employment.
4. Research projects in foundation degrees can allow students (e.g. Learning Support Assistants) to implement the recommendations arising from their research reports. Foundation degrees can also allow those who have completed the course to support less experienced colleagues.
5. For students considering a research career, schemes, providing opportunities to join staff-led research projects within the undergraduate programmes have proved very popular. But this raises funding considerations.
6. Programmes and modules should require students to reflect on their employment practices to show how learning can enhance their performance in employment.

Employer experiences

1. There is a challenge in making effective matches between student and employer so a carefully moderated pre-selection process is required.
2. Foundation degree proposals and work-based learning (WBL) initiatives are best developed with input from local businesses, sector skills councils and HE academics. In particular working with the sector skills councils gives institutions a greater awareness in developing demand-led provision.

Development and assessment of projects

1. Learning and teaching development proposals (exclusive of validation of new programmes) should be assessed by a panel that includes senior managers (PVCs), representatives from learning and teaching committees, Students' Unions, student representatives and employer representatives.
2. If projects are to adopt an e-training approach there is often a difficulty in finding staff with the required technical and pedagogical skills. In addition each project commonly has a unique set of characteristics so training at the subject-specific level is demanding.
3. Validation panels need to be clearly briefed on innovative approaches to learning (e.g. Learning in Action modules).
4. There has been limited evaluation of the impact of work-based learning but a study at Glamorgan has shown that students completing a work placement in business studies attain higher degree classifications.
5. Creation by institutions of learning through/in employment frameworks and toolkits of support materials enables staff designing courses to clearly articulate progression pathways. Course design which embraces modules of varying credit in flexible delivery patterns is well suited to the needs of students learning in the workplace and the community; the students can create a modular curriculum to reflect their work needs.
6. There are opportunities to develop work-based postgraduate programmes, for example, to address the needs of managers within the public sector.

Staff and alumni engagement

1. Students respond very well to having alumni involved in employment engagement initiatives – their examples can give students greater confidence in taking career decisions.
2. Exchange programmes allowing academic staff to work with partners outside the HE sector provides strong collaborative links and a deeper appreciation of the needs of employers.

Quality assurance

1. The quality of mentoring requires careful monitoring and evaluation.
2. Currently, funding of some initiatives is heavily reliant on short-term sources such as the European Convergence Social Fund administered through the Welsh Government. Longer term funding helps to embed initiatives and ensure their continuation and can reduce initiative overload.
3. In using open educational resources such as TELSTAR academic staff needed reassurance on the quality of materials created elsewhere and also on copyright issues.

The members of the Learning in Employment work strand hope that this leaflet has proved useful. For further reading on the experiences of accrediting learning in the workplace please see the case study collection by following the link

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/events/academyevents/2012/Learning_In_Employment_English_200412_1237.pdf

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April 2013

About Future Directions

The higher education sector in Wales is committed to delivering the best possible student experience. This means continuously working to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities. In higher education, this is called 'quality enhancement' and it can take place at university, department and course level. Universities and further education colleges who offer higher education in Wales are working together on a quality enhancement programme called 'Future Directions'.

The Future Directions programme is unique to Wales. Universities, staff, students, further education colleges, and a range of organisations are working together. This approach works in Wales because of its size – it's small enough to bring together all the key players, but big enough to offer a wide diversity of universities and creative ways of doing things. The programme aims to enhance specific areas of the student learning experience. This includes sharing practice and generating ideas for innovation in learning and teaching.

The Future Directions work is coordinated by the Higher Education Academy and is owned by Wales' higher education sector. Future Directions takes a thematic approach; working together on a specific area or theme at a time. The themes are chosen by the higher education sector, for the higher education sector.

The current theme is Graduates for Our Future with three work strands: Learning for Employment; Learning in Employment and Students as Partners.

To find out more about Future Directions, please visit: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/wales/future-directions>



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