

Narrowing the gap: alternative modes of engaging employers

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1. Introduction

Established in 1862, Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln enjoys a long-standing reputation as an independent Anglican higher education institution. The University College has around 2000 undergraduate and postgraduate full and part time students and offers a range of courses which are situated within two academic Schools: the School for Culture, Education and Innovation; and the School for Teacher Development. The University College was one of the first higher education institutions in England to introduce a Foundation Degree (FdA Education Studies for Teaching Assistants) in September 2001. Currently, three Foundation Degrees are offered: FdA Children's Services (Early Childhood); FdA Children's Services (Children and Youth Work); FdA Learning Practitioners.

Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln was awarded a grant in September 2008 by ESCalate (the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Education) to undertake a project which investigated alternative ways of engaging employers from education and children's services with Foundation Degrees at the University College.

2. Project context and outline

The project linked directly to one of the seven strategic objectives of the University College's Learning and Teaching Strategy which aims to ensure that our graduates possess the full range of higher level skills expected by employers. In this respect, the project aimed to further develop engagement with employers at operational and strategic levels. The hypothesis was that better engagement would support the development of a more effective partnership between the University College and sites

of employment or work experience for the student, thus ensuring that courses reflected the needs of the education and children's services sectors.

This project aimed to develop and trial alternative modes of engaging public, private and voluntary sector employers from education and children's services with the different phases of higher education course design and delivery. This was in order that Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln and employers could develop a shared understanding of each others' working practice and that levels of employer engagement could be increased at the different phases of course design and delivery.

The project worked with employers, tutors and students associated with the FdA Learning Practitioners and FdA Children's Services (Children and Youth Work) programmes between November 2008 and November 2009 trialling alternative modes of engagement. These were:

- work-shadowing;
- an interactive web environment;
- video conferencing;
- round-table consultation events.

Work-shadowing would involve University College tutors shadowing specific roles within work settings in order to gain up to date knowledge and understanding of practice within the education and children's services sectors. In addition, employers would be invited to shadow academic tutors during course delivery within the University College. The aim of the work shadowing activities was to encourage shared understanding of the work-based and University College-based elements of the courses.

The interactive web environment aimed to provide a discussion board and messaging facility for employers and University College tutors. It was envisaged that this would facilitate the swift exchange of information from workplace to University College and vice versa. In addition, the aim was to promote ongoing discussion of pertinent issues related to the work-based elements of both Foundation Degree courses.

Video conferencing would enable University College tutors to engage with employers in more remote settings related to education and children's services. The aim was to

allow discussion related to work-based learning elements of both Foundation Degree courses and ongoing evaluation of curriculum content and student achievement.

Round-table consultation events aimed to bring employers into the University College environment to engage in focussed discussion related to course-specific matters. For example, it was envisaged that this could include course evaluation, curriculum review, and updates for University College tutors from employers on key issues for the sector.

From the outset the project team wanted to develop a collaborative approach to the research being undertaken. This was immediately reflected in the make-up of the Operational Project Team which consisted of both Academic and Professional Support Staff directly involved in the project and also in the Project Steering Group which included: student representatives; the Business Development Manager at BG; employers from school, local government and from the private sector; a local authority school improvement advisor; a representative from ESCalate and additional specialist staff from BG. In this way, the project design and implementation in terms of embracing a wide range of employment stakeholders reflected the essence of its purpose – to evaluate new ways of narrowing the gap in terms of employer engagement with work-based degree courses.

3. How this project was different

The Foundation Degree qualification benchmark (QAA, 2004)¹ states clearly that employer involvement is a defining characteristic of Foundation Degrees and to this effect courses have been designed around this key principle since their inception in 2001. Considerable work has been done by Foundation Degree Forward (fdf)² around the strategic development of employer engagement and employer partnerships, in the form of sponsored research studies, project work and resource development. Of note is the fdf funded project carried out by the Colleges - University of Leicester Network (CULN)³ which studied the experiences of ten employers involved with Foundation Degrees. The reports associated with this work were published by CULN in March 2009.

¹ QAA (2004) *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*. Gloucester: QAA

² For more information regarding fdf access the website: <http://www.fdf.ac.uk>

³ Available from the CULN website: <http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/lifelong-learning/culn>

In addition fdf has brought together resources that will assist institutions in developing effective partnerships with employers (fdf, undated)⁴.

However, a survey of employer engagement initiative projects (sourced through the HEA website⁵) has revealed that, when focussing at a more operational level upon the actual activities associated with engaging employers, a narrow range of modes of engagement is revealed such as face-to-face contact and workshops/seminars. Therefore, the project 'Narrowing the Gap' is different in that it has sought to trial new modes of employer engagement at a more specific level than just that of harnessing partnership activity.

In addition, a survey of related Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) websites conducted by BG during 2009 revealed no work around exploring the engagement of employers from across public, private and voluntary sectors within the context of education and children's services. Higher education has traditionally engaged with local authorities when negotiating and recruiting staff to work in public service areas such as education and youth/children's services. This relationship has now changed. Alongside local authorities (the first sector), higher education must also engage with private agencies (the second sector) and voluntary agencies (the third sector). All three sectors are key stakeholders in managing public sector contracts and/or providing services to children and young people in their own right. Engaging across sectors presents higher education institutions with a new challenge and to this effect the project aimed to evaluate the sustainability of each mode for employers engaged in delivering education and children's services from different sectors (public, private and voluntary).

4. Project aims

- To develop and trial alternative modes of engaging public, private and voluntary sector employers from education and children's services with the different phases of HE course design and delivery;
- For the HEI and employers to develop a shared understanding of each others' working practice;

⁴ fdf (undated) *Employer and provider partnerships*. Lichfield: fdf

⁵ <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk>

- To increase levels of employer engagement at the different phases of course design and delivery.

5. Project outcomes

Defining employer engagement

The first steering group meeting highlighted the benefits of basing the project upon the 'embedded principle' of collaborative working. An employer representative challenged the Operational Team to define 'employer engagement' which forced us to reflect upon the assumptions we had made regarding common understandings of terminology. It was clear during the ensuing discussion that the understanding of the term held by the BG-based Operational Team was quite different to that held by employer and student representatives and a discussion paper was developed (Appendix 1) to facilitate the development of a shared understanding of the term.

Work-shadowing

Two members of academic staff engaged in shadowing roles within workplaces relevant to the Fds they were involved in. More detailed evaluations of these activities are available within the e-toolkit associated with the project.

Visit A involved the member of academic staff shadowing work undertaken by Teaching Assistants (TAs) in a Special School; discussion with a very wide ranging group of TAs during their lunch hour; a brief discussion with senior school staff. The visit was most valuable for evaluating the validity of the Fd course on offer at the HEI for the TAs in the particular setting. For example, the academic staff member was able to consider issues around assessment; preparing students for HE study through taster courses; integrating specialist opportunities or options within the course; course structure. Feedback from TAs within the setting was that, in being part of informal discussions with the HE representative, they felt respected and valued. The academic staff member felt that the information received was valuable for informing the revalidation process; in the writing of modules and sessions; and for seeking further opportunities for collaborative work.

Visit B involved a visit to a youth centre to meet with youth centre staff, observe activities and talk with young people engaged in youth centre programmes. The visit allowed for the academic staff member to see work in operation and to listen to colleagues within the sector and the client group. It also allowed for the opportunity to discuss colleagues' expectations, and those of young people themselves, of students studying at Fd level. Specific issues for consideration included: how to capture the complexity of inter-agency delivery and ensure that HE courses are current; funding; assessment (including the involvement of 'clients'); course structure and delivery; integrating specialist opportunities or options within the course. The member of academic staff noted that colleagues in the workplace were largely unaware of how learning occurred on the HE programme (despite the provision of written material) as it appeared detached from the practice setting and that the learning through HE was seen as for the students' benefit and not necessarily the settings.

Employers were invited to shadow academic tutors by joining students for taught sessions within the University College. Although there was little interest in this initiative, the project team felt that it could still be offered as an option as it did overlap with the request from employers for professional development workshops (see 'round-table consultation events', below).

An interactive web environment

Blackboard is used as the Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) for Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln and its use is integrated within courses across the University College, including all Fds. The VLE was used in two ways to support employer engagement: 1. as a portal for accessing course documentation 2. as a discussion forum for gaining employer views around a range of subjects related to the course. As a team we were confident that this mode of engagement was within the scope of the resources we had highlighted in the project bid and, in particular, we had been careful to identify the technical support required to set up areas of the Virtual Learning Environment for employers to access. However, this mode of employer engagement was compromised through difficulties accessing a database of employer details and the associated data protection issues as we tried to bring the information we did have together. This meant that there was a delay in setting up blogs for discussion which resulted in poor engagement by employers. The consensus was that we had lost momentum in engaging employers and should have used students more proactively to publicise the use of the VLE within their workplace contacts. Despite this, though, the

project team did feel that there was potential in using the VLE for engaging employers, with the following specific benefits identified:

- Making course content, objectives and outcomes available and accessible to employers
- Allowing employers and students to customise courses (through selection) to specific requirements
- Allowing employers to track student progress (where appropriate)
- Allowing employers to interact with or add materials to the learning environment
- Allowing employers to retain an accurate and up to date understanding of the course
- Facilitating employers' involvement in activities and assessment
- Creating a permanent record of student learning that can be exported for future reference or reflection

Video conferencing

A web-based video link was trialled by one academic member of staff as part of a taught session on campus with Fd students. This involved linking with a school-based senior manager for a 'Question and Answer' session around 'Every Child Matters'. The majority of the feedback received from students was highly positive. Students could see the potential for achieving instant and efficient communication through the use of video. They appreciated the value in being able to engage in a conversation as opposed to the more formal structure of an email exchange. There were some technical difficulties at times with the quality of the video link, but overall students rated the exercise as valuable and effective for engaging employers directly in course delivery.

Round-table consultation events

The 'Round-table consultation events' failed to attract support from the target groups although the idea was supported by employers within the Steering Group. A combination of poor timing and other factors beyond our control resulted in little interest from employers and the cancellation of both planned events. In evaluating the lack of success in this area, discussions within the Steering Group revealed a possible interest in how professional development opportunities could be shared between BG and work places. From this developed an idea for a new intervention – the Professional

Development Workshop, led by BG academic colleagues and focussed on exploring aspects of the vocational-academic nexus prevalent in work-based courses (for example, links to occupational standards; developing research-based practice). Although it was not possible to explore this idea within the scope of the project, this is potentially an area for future development.

7. Conclusion

'Narrowing the Gap' aimed to bring a new approach to engaging employers with Fds by focussing on very practical interventions that would enable the HEI and employers to develop a shared understanding of each others' working practice and that would increase levels of employer engagement at the different phases of course design and delivery. As outlined above, the project built upon work already done by fdf and CULN and also, uniquely, sought to work across public, private and voluntary sectors within the context of education and children's services. The four modes of engagement trialled through the project each met varying levels of success, but overall the project team felt that worthwhile work was done in moving the employer engagement agenda forward, and identified the following practical recommendations:

- When working with employers, explore shared understandings regarding use of terminology in order to bridge the HEI/work-setting gap. The gap can easily become a chasm if jargon is used insensitively and if shared meanings are not used.
- Use the VLE as a portal for employers to access documentation and to engage in discussion bringing an employer perspective to issues related to course design and delivery. Use students to 'train' employers in accessing the VLE. Introduce the use of the VLE earlier to employers and consider introducing a 'contract' that sets out minimum expectations for engagement from the employer.
- Consider how video conferencing can be built into taught sessions in order to facilitate conversations between students and practitioners. Ensure that sufficient technical support is available for developing video conferencing opportunities

- Visits to the workplace by academic staff can take a variety of forms (observing, supporting practice, discussions); are vital for the development of shared understandings regarding courses content, delivery and relevance; and should involve interaction with all stakeholders, including setting users (clients).
- Consider offering Professional Development Workshops to employers as a way of adding value to their engagement with the HEI and invite employers to do the same for academic staff. In this way reciprocal benefits may develop within a framework of active collaboration.

Appendix 1

Discussion paper: unpacking 'employer engagement'

Employers tend to engage with higher education in the context of specific learning programmes (CIHE, 2008)⁶ and in this respect Foundation Degrees provide a useful context for encouraging and deepening employer engagement with higher education. However, many employers with employees studying for Foundation Degrees at Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln may find themselves in an 'assumed' partnership with higher education because their employee is seeking a personal/professional development opportunity at degree level. This is in contrast to an approach which may see an employer acting as 'customer' to higher education – approaching the University College as a supplier of work-based training for their employees.

A model of 'active collaboration' (CIHE, 2008) best describes how the University College may view the further development of such partnerships. In this model, employer engagement would involve employers and the University College entering into dialogue in order 'to understand each other's needs [...] capabilities and constraints' (CIHE, 2008). Once such an understanding is reached, then more effective ways of

⁶ Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) (2008) *Influence through Collaboration: Employer Demand for Higher Learning and Engagement with Higher Education Summary Report*. London: CIHE

working together in partnership can be explored founded upon the key principle of reciprocity.

Therefore, a working definition of employer engagement in the context of Foundation Degrees at BG should take account of the following key themes:

- Partnership
- Dialogue
- Reciprocal benefits

Towards a definition of 'employer engagement'

Contact between BG and employers that seeks to change the knowledge, understanding or behaviour of either party for mutual benefit and for benefit which may go beyond the institution or the work setting.