

Narrowing the Gap:

Engaging employers with learning, teaching and research

'Narrowing the Gap' is an ESCalate funded project which 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 higher education course design and delivery. The project started in

October 2008 and is due to finish during the autumn 2009 with a dissemination conference at Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln. This article outlines challenges faced by the project team during the early stages of the project around collaboration, common understandings and

communication and begins to suggest that these challenges are actually the key principles for colleagues to be aware of if they are seeking not only to engage employers with course design and delivery in higher education, but also with small-scale research projects. ►





Collaboration

Foundation degrees (Fd) at Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln (BG) are designed to embrace the employer role both as provider of a work-based context for the student and also as a source of student support through a system of key contacts (Fd Children's Services) and mentors (Fd Learning Practitioners). 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 reflects the essence of its purpose – to evaluate new ways of narrowing the gap in terms of employer

engagement with work-based degree courses. Of course, there are inherent challenges in any collaborative activity and for us these included the practicalities of inclusively managing the 'stake' that each stakeholder brought to the project, as well as managing their expectations of the project and establishing common understandings, discussed next.

Common (mis)understandings

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. Needless to say, we are now working on developing a shared understanding. Similarly, as we discussed one intervention proposed for stimulating employer engagement (a form of 'round table' discussion) it transpired that



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employers were more interested in how professional development opportunities could be shared between BG and work places. From this developed a new intervention – the Professional Development Workshop for both academics and employers to focus on exploring aspects of the vocational-academic nexus prevalent in work-based courses (for example, links to occupational standards, developing research-based practice). Therefore, in developing common understandings we then had to be prepared to be flexible in terms of the project, whilst still retaining fidelity to the original project aims.

Communication

As a team we were confident that the project was manageable and within the scope of the resources we had highlighted in the project bid. 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. The support was available at BG and we had no reason to think that this part of the project would be problematic. However, it soon transpired that another huge assumption had been made on our part regarding the

ease with which we would be able to communicate with employers whose students were engaged on our Foundation degrees. We discovered that no central database of employer details existed and we soon ran into data protection issues as we tried to bring the information we did have together. Although frustrating, this was a valuable lesson for us and caused us to re-examine not only data protection policy and practice but also associated ethical issues surrounding a project such as this. What have we learned so far? If your project is genuinely a collaborative one, be prepared to listen to all of those involved and make changes as necessary.

If working with employers, explore shared understandings in order to bridge the HEI/work-setting gap that can easily become a chasm if jargon is used insensitively and if shared meanings are not used.

Do not make any assumptions about modes of communication or the status of data held at your institution.

View every step as part of a learning journey and reflect at each stage about what you and your team have learned – in terms of project outcomes and in relation to research design.



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Claire Taylor: Getting involved in small projects

I joined BG in 2002 with no research experience, having worked for 12 years in primary schools. A generous colleague helped me apply for an ESCalate small grant to investigate the Assessment of Work-Based Learning. It was successful and gave me the confidence to believe I could do small-scale project work (it also led on to doctoral study). Since then I have been involved in project work funded by the Higher Education Academy, ESRC and TDA.

