SHARING LEARNING AND LEARNING TO SHARE: THE IMPLICATIONS OF UNIVERSITIES SHARING ACADEMIC RESPONSIBILITY WITH EMPLOYERS AND OTHER ORGANISATIONS WHEN DEVELOPING LEARNING

Judy Rumbelow and Darryl Bibby, Directors, Bibby Rumbelow Ltd, United Kingdom

It is nothing new for universities to work with employers. Universities have long been undertaking academic research in partnership with employers and many individual employees have studied for postgraduate qualifications such as Masters in Business Administration (MBA) sponsored by their employers with the explicit purpose of improving their performance at work. But recently, in the UK, universities' interest in and approach to working with employers and external organisations appears to be changing in emphasis. In 2006, in support of government policy to extend the role of Higher Education in developing higher level skills in the UK workforce, the Higher Education Funding Council for England provided £102m from its Strategic Development Fund to encourage universities to pilot new ways of working with employers. The global recession leading to unprecedented levels of national debt in the UK has meant that universities have seen the first cuts in funding for several years and are now vigorously seeking sources of external income to make up for losses in teaching and capital grant. There is perhaps some irony (and maybe even some foresight!) that where universities initially made a choice to work more closely with employers some now see this as a financial imperative.

The change in emphasis in the way many universities are now seeking to work with employers and external organisations can be characterised in several ways. Firstly universities are marketing to and approaching employers as an entity rather than seeking to attract individual students from a range of employers or organisations. By working in this way universities can maximise their advantage over non-university competitors as they can potentially offer a variety of learning interventions to an employer both in terms of subject matter and level. In this way an employer might choose to source a considerable amount of its training and develop needs with one university. This has meant that universities' work with employers has increased emphasis on undergraduate as well as postgraduate provision (where formerly, particularly in older universities, emphasis was on postgraduate provision). Secondly, and to a certain extent as a consequence of a longer term aim to build relationships with specific employers, universities need to secure business by starting the relationship with an employer from the position of suppliers of educational services. An outcome of the universities' aim to work with employers in this way is the need for fundamental change in systems and procedures which were originally designed with individual students (in most cases young adults) in mind. While it is recognised that to work successfully with employers in this way change is needed in administrative systems such as finance and registry, this paper focuses on changes required in an area that can be preciously guarded by universities – the academic curriculum.

As universities compete with each other and with private learning providers to provide learning for employers and other external organisations they are recognising that a curriculum which meets the needs of their clients is essential to engage with business. This may often mean offering flexible and work-based delivery and innovative methods of assessment which suit specific employer demands. Such flexibility and client focus is likely to demand more responsive quality assurance systems. In a bid to ensure that their client needs are met and to build strong and lasting relationships with employers several UK universities are exploring ways of sharing academic responsibility for the design and assessment of learning programmes with external organisations and employers. This paper examines the implications for universities, who in many cases have until recently have had

complete control over curriculum development, assessment and quality assurance, are now sharing that responsibility with employers and external organisations.

The paper starts by outlining typical aspects of curriculum development, assessment and quality assurance where universities are already sharing responsibility with employers and examines the implications for the university in terms of both the management and outcomes of the process. Two specific examples are then presented to illustrate ways in which responsibility for curriculum sharing has been approached. The tensions and challenges for current and future practice in lifelong learning which aims to share responsibility for curriculum development further are analysed. The paper concludes by attempting to position the notion of universities working more flexibly and openly with external organisations and employers within the context of the wider and emerging notion of restorative education.

A review of the current situation

In the UK a number of universities are explicitly committed to working with employers and external organisations (BIS 2009) and it is in these institutions that considerable steps towards sharing responsibility for curriculum development, assessment and quality assurance have already occurred (Caley 2001, Portwood 2001). Typically universities may start by negotiating the content of a learning programme with an employer or external organisation. To do this successfully the university must gain a thorough understanding of the organisation's development needs and also the working context in which these must be met. This activity can be complex and employers (as well as the university) need to be able to devote time to it, perhaps organising access for university staff who are working on the programme to employees and their managers in a range of operational roles. University staff can also make the process easier for the employer by trying to work alongside the operational demands of the workplace – for example fitting in meetings to suit working schedules and offering to come to the workplace rather than expecting an employer to visit the university. University staff may also need to gain a broad understanding of the overall development strategy of an organisation so that a programme they are designing meshes explicitly with existing workplace development programmes at other levels, for example.

Universities are also sharing responsibility for assessment with external organisations. Staff from an external organisation may have responsibility for delivering a proportion of the learning programme and undertaking assessment of students especially where elements of the assessment judgement relate to knowledge judged alongside performance in the workplace. Sharing this responsibility has implications for the way the university manages the assessment process. The assessment judgements and decisions made by staff from external organisations must be thoroughly moderated to ensure marking of assessments is standardised across different employers completing the same programme. Universities may also wish to mandate particular training and development for those who assess students' work. At present fewer employer staff take an active role in quality assurance, but even so, employer staff may attend approval panels that make judgments about the level and value of credit awarded for particular programmes, and those who have marked student assessments may also take an active part in assessment or exam boards.

Universities who are committed to substantial involvement of employers and external organisations in the development of the curriculum are not in the majority in the UK. Furthermore, some considerable anxiety is expressed within the Higher Education sector itself and more generally that too close a relationship between employers and Higher Education might dilute the essence of Higher Education and make it instrumentally focused and based only on workplace performance rather than the development of complex and higher level skills and knowledge. It should also be noted that even where universities are making every effort to work with employers in the design, delivery and assessment of the curriculum, the final say about what is included in the curriculum, the level and credit value of learning and the way it should be assessed remains with the university rather than the

external organisation. In addition, the long established university systems and procedures associated with all elements of curriculum development, delivery, assessment and quality assurance can make it difficult to work collaboratively with employers.

The general anxiety about the effect working more closely with employers in the area of curriculum design might have, the tradition of the institution holding power over and responsibility for the award of credit for learning and the rigidity of existing university systems and procedures all make for a variety of tensions as universities start to consider working more closely with employers. Now we examine two more detailed examples of how this has happened in practice and highlight the tensions and challenges for the university in embracing this new way of working.

Example 1 - designing and negotiating a learning programme with a private sector employer

In this example the university approached a group of private and public sector employers with a view to working with each of them to design a leadership programme for middle managers. The aim was to design a generic programme and award which could then be customised for each company. One of the companies which actively embraced the invitation to work with the university on the initial design of the programme was a national logistics company.

The company was willing to share detailed information what they wanted from the leadership programme. They wanted a programme to develop particular skills which they had identified and they also wanted the programme both to act and be perceived as part of a strategy for developing internal talent in staff for promotion to higher levels. The programme needed to mesh with existing development programmes at higher and lower levels. The company was also keen that the programme was seen to be committed to company values and aspirations. Although the content of the programme, the learning methodology and the assessment strategy were initially suggested by university staff this was discussed with the employer from the earliest stages of development and throughout the design process.

To achieve this level of collaboration between university and employer the employer needed to be prepared to share detailed and in some cases commercially sensitive information with the university. They also needed to be prepared to spend time reviewing and commenting on the programme the university was designing. The university needed to approach the employer with an open mind and listen to their needs for the learning programme and convert these into a programme which delivered the required learning and met the university requirements for quality and standards. The employer allowed the university access to information about operational challenges and also to talk to managers and training and development specialists. In response to this freedom of access the university had to behave in a way which respected the protocols and sensitivities of the employer.

In this example the relationship with the employer was built and maintained by two members of university staff as part of a specially funded project designed to promote the building of relationships of this kind (Bibby 2007). The priority of these staff and the unit that supported them was to learn how to build effective relationships with employers. With this remit there were few tensions in the relationship between these staff and the employer representative. The challenges arose when these staff brought the programme they had designed with the employer to the university for approval. These included concern that the level of customisation of the programme sought by the employer would restrict entry and make it inappropriate for study by other students. Academics on the university approval panel were also concerned that the speed at which the programme must be approved did not fit with planned university timetables. Finally some concerns were raised that the emphasis on practice and associated theory espoused in the programme rather than the more traditional method of exploring existing theory and applying it to practice was inappropriate for a Higher Education programme. In practice the programme was designed with a generic core, making it suitable for study

for students from any employer. Customisation was achieved via delivery and assessment methodology. The programme's passage to approval was actively managed through university quality assurance systems in a period of about 8 weeks. The relationship between practice and theory was explicitly articulated by tutors on the programme and justified using theoretical models such as those described by Schon (1983) and Lave and Wenger (1991).

Example 2 - negotiating a work-based assessment programme with a public sector organisation

In the second example the university worked with a large public sector organisation to design an assessment strategy for the same programme referred to above that used real and immediate operational challenges as the medium and context in which students demonstrated their ability to meet the programme's learning outcomes. In practice this meant that staff from the university attended part of the senior management team meetings for the organisation to gain an understanding of particular challenges that managers were facing at that time. University staff then customised the generic assessment tasks so that students could respond using the context of work challenges in their individual organisation. Employer staff had oversight of the design of the customised assessment tasks and their approval of the design of each task was sought before they were passed to students.

This design of the assessment process was attractive to employers as it provided a mechanism for and encouragement to their middle managers to provide solutions for existing organisational challenges. This was a particularly efficient way of allowing students to demonstrate learning by undertaking activities which were clearly beneficial to both their own work and the wider organisational purpose.

This approach caused some tensions and challenges for the university in delivery. Firstly university staff needed to spend a considerable amount of time building a relationship with the organisation to allow them to feel confident sharing information about professional challenge and problems. This relationship was underpinned by a high level of trust between the organisation and the university in relation to confidentiality. Also the immediacy of the approach to assessment where a problem occurred and assessment tasks were immediately designed to reflect it did not match well with a typical university approval process which requested all elements of an assessment process to be agreed at the beginning of a programme.

In each of these examples it might be anticipated that the cost of taking such care to account for the needs and aims of the client in curriculum design would be prohibitive for a university. However in practice, this process was not as time consuming as might be imagined with not many more meetings than would be expected to establish a strong relationship with any potential client who might purchase extensively from the university. The difference lay in the purpose and focus of the meetings which was explicitly to share ideas on curriculum development rather than simply to stimulate a purchase.

Implications for sharing responsibility

In sharing responsibility for curriculum development each university must decide the extent of the influence they wish employers or external organisations to have. Since each university has responsibility for the standards and quality of learning for which they award credit, it is essential that they retain overall control over the end point of curriculum for which they award credit. Yet several universities are now seeking a balanced position where they can retain enough control over the integrity, value and quality of curriculum design, delivery and assessment yet can benefit from the energy and 'real world' focus which working closely with employers brings. Far from delivering a curriculum which is instrumental and overly focused on issues of competence rather than potential, for many sharing curriculum design with employers can bring considerable benefits that can reach more widely than the initial programme. For example, teaching staff who work closely with the employer or external organisation quickly gain a strong understanding of up to date issues that are challenging

employers. This knowledge can be used to enhance their teaching of traditional students who are seeking to learn employability skills. Employers can also bring a refreshing and stimulating focus on practice and its relationship with theory which can lead to the design of a curriculum which challenges or supports the deconstruction of accepted theoretical positions.

And so to restorative education. An aspect of the notion of restorative practice is the analysis of situations from a variety of perspectives, especially the non-traditional. So all those involved in a situation have a voice in the process of generating an outcome which takes accounts of the breadth of needs and perspective, rather than individuals ceding the decision about outcomes to a group or individual in a position of power. In the area of curriculum design, universities judge what knowledge is of academic value and also dictate how it should be taught, learned and disseminated. As some universities take tentative steps to share responsibility for curriculum design with employers, albeit for economic as much as pedagogic reasons, they broaden the perspective from which the relevance and appropriateness of a curriculum is judged. They also hand some small part of their responsibility to an organisation who has compatible yet different goals and imperatives. One outcome of this is the provision of an opportunity for fresh ideas about curriculum content which has the potential to revitalise aspects of higher level learning which go beyond that provided for employers. Sharing responsibility for curriculum design may also have the effect of widening participation in learning. If those new to learning are accessing education and development through their workplace, a curriculum which is explicitly linked to what they do at work is likely to increase their confidence as learners and highlight the relevance of what they learn to their work. While this approach does not address any injustice as might be expected in the notion of restorative education it certainly encourages the voice of all those involved in the learning process to be heard in its design and assessment. Some may see an irony in the fact that it has taken threats of reduced funding for traditional learners in the UK to advance practice and outlook in this area, yet the outcome, as more universities explore the potential benefits of learning to share responsibility for curriculum design, may also highlight a way to develop a broader, more relevant and vibrant curriculum.

References

Bibby, D. (2007) *Dressing the Emporer: Valuing Informal Learning*, 5th International Conference on Researching Learning and Work, Cape Town

Caley, L. (2001) 'The Possibilities in a Traditional University' in Boud, D. and Solomon, N. (eds) *Work-based Learning: A New Higher Education?* Milton Keynes, Open University Press

Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) (2009) *Higher Ambitions. The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy*, London

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Portwood, D. (2001) 'Making it Work Institutionally' in Boud, D. and Solomon, N. (eds) *Work-based Learning: A New Higher Education?* Milton Keynes, Open University Press

Schon, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action*, London, Temple Smith