



UNIVERSITY VOCATIONAL AWARDS COUNCIL

# Strategic Plan

## 2008–2013

...championing higher level vocational learning

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# 1. Our History and Achievements

UVAC was established in 1999 with 26 HEI members and Edexcel to champion higher vocational learning. Since then our membership has grown to over 100, encompassing higher education institutions, further education colleges and a range of corporate members including the LSC, QCA, UCAS, Association of Colleges, HE Academy, awarding bodies, the National Council for Work Experience and Lifelong Learning Networks. For the last two years UVAC has provided the secretariat to the Mixed Economy Group (MEG) of further education colleges.

Summarising our achievements, UVAC has:

- Influenced and made a substantial contribution to the debate on graduate employability and the skills agenda, which is now central to higher education policy
- Published over 20 research reports and guides on topics such as recognising and supporting high level work-based learning, the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), the use of National Occupational Standards in higher education, level 4 and 5 NVQs, and progression to higher education from Apprenticeship programmes. Additionally our Annual Conference proceedings have summarised the agenda for vocational and work-based learning in higher education and provided a showcase for innovation in the delivery of higher level work-based learning
- Held nine annual conferences, which have risen in standing to become the leading national conference for those interested in higher level vocational and work-based learning at all HE levels
- Organised a range of other events – conferences, seminars and workshops on higher level skills, Apprenticeship, credit, National Occupational Standards, APEL, fair admissions and level 4 and 5 NVQs
- Organised a national campaign to promote the value of higher level practical learning with the Edge Foundation
- Developed and disseminated innovative, cutting-edge approaches to the validation of company-based learning programmes, culminating in the establishment of HE@Work in partnership with the Edge Foundation
- Kept members informed of UVAC activities and wider developments in higher vocational learning through regular newsletters.

With the recent establishment of HE@Work to engage and support large employers and HEIs in the validation of internal company learning programmes to HE standards, UVAC has the opportunity to take stock and consider our future priorities and objectives.

This strategic plan has been developed to build on the achievements of our first nine years of operation in the new environment in which UVAC now operates. Above all this strategic plan focuses on how UVAC can deliver a portfolio of added-value services for all our members and continue to make a defined and significant impact on the higher level vocational and work-based agenda, particularly in the context of the current economic downturn.

## 2. Higher Education: The Policy and Operational Context – A Brief Analysis

The higher education and high level skills agenda has developed and changed significantly since UVAC was incorporated in 1999. The last nine years have seen vocational, work-based learning and employer engagement move into the sector's mainstream, and they are now central to any debate on the future of higher education. Some organisations and initiatives have come and gone, many remain and many new ones have been established. In the following paragraphs we provide a brief analysis<sup>1</sup> of the environment in which UVAC now operates, focusing on key policies, organisations, the skills and expertise of our members, systems and processes, products, devolution and the wider market pressures and opportunities facing the higher education sector.

A range of new government proposals and policies, particularly in the areas of HE expansion, widening participation and employer engagement, have a significant impact on the UVAC agenda:

### 2.1 HE Expansion and Widening Participation

- The Skills Public Service Agreement is underpinned by two key indicators – i) the proportion of working age adults qualified to level 4 and above should reach 34 per cent by 2011 and 36 per cent by 2014; ii) increased participation in higher education towards 50 per cent of those aged 18 to 30, with growth of at least a percentage point every two years to the academic year 2010/11
- The paper, *A New University Challenge – Unlocking Britain's Talent*<sup>2</sup>, encourages local partners to establish a case for a higher education centre or university campus
- The Higher Education Act and foundation degree-awarding powers for further education colleges will have a significant impact on many HEIs in UVAC membership as well as the Mixed Economy Group (MEG) of FECs
- One of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills' (DIUS) three core priorities<sup>3</sup> for the future of HE, that '*HEIs work to widen participation beyond young people leaving college or school with good A levels*', is particularly relevant to UVAC, given our track record in championing progression to HE from Apprenticeship programmes and level 3 vocational qualifications for adults and full-time employees as well as young people.

### 2.2 Workforce Development and Employer Engagement

- The *Innovation Nation* White Paper<sup>4</sup> acknowledges the role played by HEIs in innovation and includes a proposal to introduce voucher schemes to encourage first contact between SMEs and universities. The Enterprise Strategy *Enterprise: Unlocking the UK's Talent*<sup>5</sup> outlines the government's approach to, among other topics, unlocking the nation's entrepreneurial talents and boosting enterprise, skills and knowledge. Linked to

the above is the DIUS consultation *Higher Education at Work High Skills: High Value*<sup>6</sup> which focuses on the development of policy approaches to produce ‘*more and more employable graduates; and to raise the skills and capacity for innovation and enterprise of those already in the workforce*’. This is central to the UVAC agenda and that of our members

■ In England at an HE policy level there is potentially a synergy between approaches to knowledge transfer, research, innovation, foundation degrees, employability, workforce development and employer engagement. Synergy in all the above areas is needed if partnership is to be of real benefit to the HEI and employer. An important question for UVAC is how we relate our work on skills to wider approaches to employer engagement incorporating knowledge transfer, research and innovation.

### 2.3 New Organisations

A range of new organisations has been established to support HEIs in engaging employers and developing approaches to workforce development. Among the more significant, focusing on similar development areas to UVAC, are:

- **fdf** – Although originally established to support foundation degree development and promotion, fdf now focuses on workforce development at all HE levels and bringing employers and institutions to the same table
- **The HE Academy** – The HEA has developed a major role in commissioning research studies on work-based learning, has established a work-based learning research network, is developing a directory of consultants with expertise in employer engagement who can support HEIs and has established an HEI Pro Vice Chancellor Special Interest Group focusing on employer engagement, to gain strategic buy-in from institutions to this agenda
- **Other organisations** have also developed a significant role in higher level vocational learning:
  - We have two new government departments, DIUS and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)
  - Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) have been licensed as UK employer-led organisations to reduce skills gaps and shortages, improve productivity and improve learning supply, including higher education. DIUS has stated it wants to see universities working with Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), SSCs and local employers to develop high level skills that a particular business or business community needs in a particular sector in a particular place and plans to empower SSCs to incentivise demand for higher level skills in their sectors<sup>7</sup>
  - National Skills Academies have been established. These will work with universities and have a specific remit for supporting the accreditation of in-house training that employers already do
  - A new universal adult careers service in England, the Adult Advancement and Careers Service
  - The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) has been established as a single, employer-led board to provide direct and independent advice to ministers on raising UK prosperity and opportunity by improving employment and skills.

6 DIUS, March 2008

7 Higher Education at Work, DIUS 2008

UVAC must also continue to work with other partner organisations that existed at our formation, particularly UUK, AoC, Edexcel, City and Guilds, OCR and NCWE. With UVAC support, the Mixed Economy Group (MEG) of FECs is also developing an identity and voice. Lifelong Learning Networks, many of whom are UVAC members, focus on collaboration, clarifying and supporting progression opportunities for vocational learners.

Whereas UVAC was once a lone voice, the marketplace for higher level work-based and vocational learning is now very crowded, creating substantial competition for development funding and more competition for our views to be heard and, above all, the need to articulate UVAC's uniqueness and the added value we bring.

Many UVAC members have developed substantial expertise in workforce development. UVAC should utilise the substantial expertise in research and delivery developed in recent years by many of its members in the field of work-based learning and employer engagement, often through Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) and through the establishment of specialist work-based learning centres and units. Neither should the expertise of our FE MEG members in these areas be underestimated. Crucially UVAC must also define what added value can be provided to members who have developed substantial expertise in workforce development and employer engagement.

## **2.4 New Systems and Processes**

Following testing and ministerial approval, the Qualifications and Credit Framework, a new way of recognising learning achievements by awarding credit for qualifications and units (small steps of learning), will gradually replace the National Qualifications Framework. Recognition has also been given to employer-developed qualifications: Network Rail, Flybe and McDonald's were the first employers to gain such powers. Such developments may impact significantly on HE approaches to student recruitment and credit.

SSC Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs), which originally focused on lower level skills, will increasingly encompass higher level skills and are therefore likely to have a significant impact on HEIs. Indeed Leitch<sup>8</sup> went so far as to suggest that all vocational higher education programmes should be approved by SSCs. DIUS has since pulled back from this position, but SSCs are empowered to endorse qualifications delivered in further education at higher education levels.

HEFCE's role in workforce development has also developed significantly. It is supporting HEIs to develop systems for employer engagement and providing additional support for the delivery of learning programmes with employers. Central to such activity is HEFCE's emphasis on putting employer/employee needs at the heart of what an HEI does. HEFCE is also exploring and testing different models for funding workforce development and, in particular, approaches to co-funding.

Approaches to credit have developed and a timetable has been established for the use of nationwide credit arrangements to be used in higher education. Indeed, DIUS wants to encourage rapid implementation of an effective framework for credit accumulation and transfer.

Brokerage has been a major development area in the field of employer engagement. Approaches include Train to Gain (which moves to RDAs during 2009), new SSC approaches through Compacts that will operate as gateways to workforce development funding and *fdf*'s Employer Based Training Accreditation (EBTA) service.

## 2.5 New Products

Foundation degrees, introduced in 2001, have enjoyed vigorous growth with strong government backing. Numbers are set to grow from the current 72,000 places to 100,000 places in 2010. SSCs have already developed foundation degree sector frameworks that provide SSC sector guidance and advice for HEIs/FECs developing, validating and reviewing foundation degrees.

14-19 Diplomas were introduced from September 2008 and will be an entitlement for all young people by 2013. Meanwhile Apprenticeship numbers continue to rise, with government aiming to double the number of Apprenticeship completions by 2020. For UVAC members an undoubted challenge will be supporting and developing appropriate progression routes to higher education for individuals following such learning programmes and qualifications.

## 2.6 Devolution

Devolution has and will continue to have a major impact on how UVAC, as an organisation professing to act UK-wide, operates.

- In Scotland, *'Skills for Scotland'* (2007)<sup>9</sup> focuses on the individual and employer and the development of a 'cradle to grave' approach to learning and skills, and a *'globally competitive economy based on high value jobs with progressive and innovative business leadership'*
- In Wales, education, skills and lifelong learning are devolved and the National Assembly for Wales has promised to *'establish a strong future for Welsh universities by producing a ten-year strategy for adequately funded development and expansion'*
- In Northern Ireland, *Success through Skills – The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland 2006*, sets out how the Department for Employment and Learning will work in partnership to support individuals' progression up the skills ladder, raise the skills level of the whole workforce, help deliver higher productivity, increase competitiveness and secure Northern Ireland's future in the global marketplace.

## 2.7 Market Pressures and Opportunities

Finally, the sector faces new market pressures and opportunities, the impact of the credit crisis and recession, national and international competition for students, student debt and tuition fees, potentially less favourable fiscal settlements for HE resulting from greater constraints on, and competition for, public spending, and more focus on adult learners.

Leitch has highlighted that around three-quarters of the 2020 workforce have already left compulsory education, so the UK economy will need more people currently in the workforce to acquire high level skills. The importance of the adult market for HEIs is further emphasised when considering that the number of 18–20 year olds (who currently account for over 70 per cent of entrants to full-time undergraduate programmes) is projected to fall sharply between 2009 and 2019. Falls will be particularly marked in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and some English regions, although some regions still have some way to go to increase HE participation rates among young people in line with national targets.

Train to Gain may be a key vehicle for meeting the government target for qualifications at level 4 and above among people of working age, as well as for lower level qualifications. A national rollout subsequent to the three Higher Level Skills Pathfinders could be a significant opportunity for the HE sector to increase its engagement with employers in workforce development. Market threats, meanwhile, include the policy to withdraw funding for equivalent or lower HE qualifications (ELQs). This has serious implications for some parts of the sector, despite the compromise to exempt foundation degrees from the policy.

There will be an ever-greater emphasis on ensuring SMEs have access to the management and leadership support they need. A recent CBI survey found that among businesses with less than 50 employees, 71 per cent had used private provision for some of their learning and development needs, but only 20 per cent had used FE and 15 per cent HE.<sup>10</sup> The LSC National Employer Skills Survey estimated that in 2005, total employer expenditure on training in England amounted to £33.3bn.<sup>11</sup> Although much of this expenditure covered labour costs of those being trained and on-the-job training, DIUS recently estimated that approximately £5bn of this training spend was 'on offer' to providers of higher education.<sup>12</sup> A total of 12 million adults in the workforce have qualifications below level 4. Of this number 30 per cent would consider going to university at some time in the future and 6 per cent were already seriously considering such an option.<sup>13</sup>

The credit crisis and recession will obviously have a major impact on the sector and the above analysis. There will undoubtedly be new HE-based approaches to support business and develop the skills of individuals made redundant and those facing redundancy. The context of HEI/business partnership will change, as potentially will the relative importance of different sectors of the economy, and graduate skills and unemployment may be a major issue. The role of HE in supporting business, employees and potential new entrants in the context of the recession and future recovery will undoubtedly be a major theme of HE policy and delivery.

In the context of the above factors, the credit crisis and recession, institutions will face a range of different challenges and opportunities depending on whether they position themselves as research-led, teaching or business-facing. As UVAC, we must define and deliver a unique and valued contribution in this changing marketplace, where we have strength in our independence, expertise and track record, but where our partners are almost invariably larger and better resourced.

### 3. Why We Are Different

Although many partner organisations have a role and interest in vocational and work-based higher education, UVAC has a unique combination of strengths:

- UVAC was established by and is owned, managed and run for the HE sector by the HE sector
- We have an established track record in supporting and championing all forms of accredited higher education/higher level skills/ higher level learning whenever and wherever it takes place, from NVQs 4 and 5, HNDs/ HNCs and foundation degrees through honours programmes to higher degrees
- We have developed a niche in understanding and supporting:
  - Work-based progression to higher level learning, particularly from Apprenticeship
  - The recognition and accreditation of company-developed learning programmes as HE qualifications (initially through NVC and now through HE@Work)
- A particular strength has been to support our words with action: not only developing responses to consultations, running conferences and events, undertaking research and articulating good practice, but also testing and trialling approaches to the accreditation and validation of company-developed learning programmes
- Our membership spans HEIs, FECs delivering higher education (in particular MEG), LLNs, OCR, LSC, QCA, UCAS and others; in addition we have strategic relationships with Edexcel and other awarding bodies – potentially a very powerful network.

Accordingly we have greater independence but less resource than many of our partners and ‘competitors’. We have the opportunity to act as a ‘critical friend’ in respect of policies and development approaches, but do not have an established place within the ‘policy tent’ or at the high table. Subject to finances and resource, UVAC has the ability to follow an independent agenda, shaped and steered by our Board and members. Above all, our independence, capacity to ‘think outside the box’ and ability as a small organisation to ‘think fast and move quickly’ will allow UVAC to punch above its weight.

### 4. Our Values and Mission

#### **We believe in...**

- The value of learning gained by people during their working lives
- The value of experiential and reflective learning
- The importance of meeting the higher vocational learning needs of individuals and employers.

#### **Our Mission...**

UVAC will be the leading membership organisation championing and mainstreaming innovation in vocational and work-based learning at all higher education levels.

## 5. Aims and Objectives 2008 – 2013

### Aim 1: Advocacy

#### Objectives:

1. To have in UVAC membership 90 per cent of UK HEIs with a core interest in the vocational and work-based learning agenda, and MEG colleges and partner organisations which support our agenda
2. To be recognised by the sector, government, agencies and partners as the national representative body for HEIs and partner organisations committed to the higher level skills and work-based learning agenda
3. To develop and thereafter campaign upon, in full consultation with the UVAC membership, a national five-year policy manifesto
4. On the basis of the UVAC manifesto to consult members on key consultations and develop authoritative and respected responses that make an impact
5. To develop and implement a system of agreed Board spokespersons on UVAC's manifesto – with support for press releases, media interviews, keynote speeches and related lobbying.

### Aim 2: Member Services

#### Objectives:

6. To hold an annual conference that is regarded as the key national event for all those engaged in higher level skills at all HE levels and to develop an annual programme of networking and consultation events
7. To define and deliver a portfolio of added-value member services, e.g. staff training and development regarding employer engagement/work-based learning, and support for members in employer engagement and widening participation through initiatives such as HE@Work
8. To maximise the knowledge and involvement of members in UVAC activities through the development of our website and publication of a quarterly newsletter.

### Aim 3: Research

#### Objectives:

9. To research a portfolio of good practice guides on delivering high quality work-based and vocational learning and supporting progression from level 3 work-based and vocational learning to higher level learning in accordance with the UVAC manifesto
10. To commission authoritative and respected research reports that advance debate, understanding and the value, availability and quality of higher level vocational and work-based learning.

## **Aim 4: Dissemination**

### **Objectives:**

- 11.** To develop an online website 'society' or 'community of practice' function for individuals working in or with an interest in higher level vocational and work-based learning, focused on sharing good practice and collecting and disseminating views, experience and approaches
- 12.** To publish, disseminate and maximise awareness and use of UVAC research reports and good practice guides.

In addition to delivery of the above aims and objectives, UVAC will continue to provide the MEG secretariat and fully integrate the needs of MEG members in the delivery of the above objectives.

## **6. Governance**

The UVAC Board comprises senior academics and personnel from institutions committed to the vocational and work-based agenda. UVAC seeks to have a Board membership drawn from across the countries and regions of the UK. The Board is chaired by a serving university Vice Chancellor. Observers are drawn from UUK and the LSC.

Board meetings are held quarterly and agree and oversee the strategic direction and financial probity of UVAC.

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