

UVAC RESPONSE

Skills Commission inquiry into technician and higher level skills

UVAC aims to be the leading membership organisation involved in championing and mainstreaming innovation in vocational and work-based learning at all higher education levels. Established in 1999, UVAC has a membership of over 80 organisations including higher education institutions, further education colleges, Lifelong Learning Networks and a range of corporate members. UVAC was established by and is owned, managed and run for the higher education sector for the higher education sector.

UVAC focuses on:

- Identifying, researching and disseminating innovation in vocational and work-based learning at all higher education levels
- Championing the potential of higher-level employer training programmes (at all levels and of all sizes) to be developed and validated as higher education qualifications
- Championing progression to higher level skills programmes from Apprenticeships and work-based and vocational qualifications for both young people and adults.

Core to all UVAC's activities are advocacy, the provision of member services and research and dissemination.

Our Response

This response draws on the discussion at a consultation event on the Inquiry held by UVAC for the Skills Commission and hosted by the University of Winchester on 12th May 2011.

HEIs and FECs delivering higher education have a fundamental role to play in supporting the development of technician and higher level skills. Many excellent examples exist of HEIs working with businesses in a range of sectors and at a range of levels to support the development of skills, knowledge and competence of employees that businesses need to realise their objectives. Regrettably, such examples are often just that and often not a mainstream part of HE delivery - prone to curtailment with the end of 'initiative' funding or departure of key members of staff. Developing the role of HE providers in the development of technician and higher level skills is, however, fundamental for several reasons.

- By linking the world class expertise the HE sector has in research and learning to the development of the skills of the workforce, the UK would have a powerful vehicle, through HE, for business growth. HEIs and FECs delivering HE have expertise that could support employers to develop the skills, knowledge and competence of their employees and deliver business objectives.

- An understandable ladder of craft through technician and higher level provision is essential to support social mobility for those in craft level occupations. University must not be seen as primarily for 18/19 year olds starting full-time programmes, but instead for both young people and adults who may well want to continue in employment, but who are willing and able to benefit from HE provision. Apprentices and other adults in employment will often be unable to afford to give up work, but many will have the ability and aspiration to pursue a higher education qualification through part-time and work-based routes leading from craft, through technician to professional occupations. Similarly, employers will not want to 'lose' skilled employees to full-time HE programmes, but may well support an employee to pursue an HE programme where it enhances knowledge and skills levels and individual performance and contributes to the delivery of a business objective.
- Supporting HE and FE develop this role would also open up new markets for HE services and enable HEIs/FECs to secure business and income from employers, thereby underpinning the development of the existing HE sector.

Definitions can be problematic to this debate – We would suggest 'technician skills' relate to level 4 and 5 in the Qualifications and Credit Framework and level 4 and 5 in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, equivalent to the first and second year of a full-time Foundation degree. Higher level skills relate to skills **and** knowledge and competence at all HE levels, level 4 to level 8. We believe the term 'higher education' encompasses higher level skills, although such provision is different, but equal in value to traditional full time HE delivery. Of course, it is unlikely that the skills required by an individual, or a particular group of employees will relate to just one level, or even just higher level skills. The level of skills provision may be of relatively little importance to an employer, their interest will be in the delivery of skills, knowledge and competence solution(s) that delivers a business objective(s). Defining what HE and FE can provide will again be based on employer and individual need, it will potentially include; consultancy, programme design, knowledge development, assessment, validation and is not solely concerned with the delivery of learning programmes whether delivered at the institution, by a partner or in the workplace.

The following points are key to this debate:

- **Delivering Technician and Higher Level Skills Provision (including HE delivered by FE) must be based on Employer Needs** – To deliver the technician and higher level skills employers required, HE must first start by defining the needs of the employer (and learner) and determining a skills solution that will contribute to and deliver defined business objectives. Existing programmes will play a role, but bespoke, flexible, bite-sized, part-time provision, accrediting in-house provision and blended and work-based learning, offering credit accumulation and transfer and flexible start and completion dates will be essential to the

delivery of technician and higher level skills provision. Such provision must be demand led and not supply driven.

HE Is, working as appropriate with FECs, can and should be supported to deliver bespoke, flexible, bite-sized, part-time provision, blended and work-based learning. Such provision should be recognised by Government, HEFCE and QAA as different BUT equal to traditional HE programmes aimed at young people.

- ***Changing the Culture, Language and Understanding of the HE Sector*** – HE is about far more than three year full time degrees for young people. Delivery of technician and higher level skills provision will often be very different to a significant proportion of traditional HE provision for ‘A’ level entrants. The notion that the provision of technician and higher level skills provision is ‘inferior’, ‘low quality’ or ‘not proper HE’ is untrue and must be rejected. Indeed, many of the approaches HE will use to deliver technician and higher level skills provision, learning from practice, reflection, integration of knowledge and competence will share the characteristics of the delivery of high level learning for the professions, medicine being a particularly appropriate example. HEIs must recognise the value of technician and higher level skills delivery by their own staff in terms of career development, progression and promotion.

HEIs should be invited to make a commitment to this agenda and work with partners including FECs, SSCs and others to develop their role in this area as a core part of their mission. Government should regard the development of the HEI and FEC role in technician and higher level skills provision as fundamental to HE policy.

Ensuring Funding Systems support the Delivery of Technician and Higher Level Skills Provision – Two separate funding systems (HEFCE and SFA) for higher level skills programmes acts as a barrier to development and delivery in this area. The funding of Higher Apprenticeship represents a particular problem, particularly how NVQ funding and Foundation degree funding (and in particular loans) are combined and can support the delivery of the programme. The role of HE and FE in the delivery of Higher Apprenticeship will be fundamental to support opportunities for progression from level 3 Apprenticeship and through technician level occupations to professional status, how HEFCE and SFA funding jointly supports Higher Apprenticeship must be more transparent.

The HE and FE sectors need to work with Government and the funding agencies to determine how funding systems (and loans) can support the delivery of technician and higher level skills provision in general and Higher Apprenticeship in particular.

Related issues include:

- The existing cap on student numbers can limit the ability of HEIs and FECs to participate in the technician and higher level skills market.

- The FE/HE interface can complicate the delivery of technician and higher level skills provision.
- HE validation processes are not sufficiently fast or responsive, meaning businesses requiring a skills solution often work with private sector providers. HEIs need to adopt flexible and faster approaches to accreditation and validation; businesses will expect commercial and not academic timeframes. There should be no reason why a faster timescale should mean lower quality, businesses will act as a check and will want to receive high quality provision.
- Employers are often confused by the plethora of provision and find it difficult to find the 'right' contact in an HEI (or FEC) to discuss how an HEI can help them develop the skills of their employers. Navigating the system and understanding the language can be problematic for employers. Are 'one stop shops' involving local partnerships one potential solution?
- Partnerships between HEIs and FECs with SSCs and employer organisations can be difficult to develop, particularly given the number of HEIs, FECs and SSCs. NOS and use of learning frameworks (e.g. apprenticeships) represent useful tools to foster partnership. Regional and sub-regional partnerships can provide added value and sometimes national co-ordination could be beneficial.
- If HE does not respond to this agenda the private sector will, private providers may also increasingly compete with HEIs in the provision and delivery of 'traditional' HE programmes.
- HE must be supported to enable individuals to step onto and step off learning programmes on the basis of individual and business needs – they should not be penalised for so doing.
- HE can act as a facilitator in developing a licence to practice, linked to professional body recognition by assessing and validating knowledge, skills and competence.

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