

UK Commission for Employment and Skills Consultation – University Vocational Awards Council Response

University Vocational Awards Council - Our Background and Mission

The University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) was established in 1999 with 26 HEI members and Edexcel, to champion higher vocational learning. Since 1999 our membership has grown to over 100, encompassing HEIs, FECs, LLNs and a range of corporate members including the LSC, QCA, UCAS, Association of Colleges, HE Academy, OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA), the National Council for Work Experience and a small number of SSCs and employers. UVAC also has strategic relationships with awarding bodies Edexcel and City and Guilds. For the last two years UVAC has provided the secretariat to the Mixed Economy Group (MEG) of Further Education Colleges.

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

To support the recognition of higher level work-based learning UVAC recently established HE@Work as a new not-for-profit consultancy with the Edge Foundation (which has provided funding in its first year of £350,000 to HE@Work). The aim of HE@Work is to make workplace learning which is delivered on the basis of business need count as recognised academic learning and thereby facilitate the award of higher qualifications (degrees, masters, MBAs, and postgraduate certificates) to employees. HE@Work does this by structuring training and work experience so that it is academically recognised. There is the added benefit that structuring workplace learning in this way can also bring measurable efficiencies in training and competency management.

Consequently, HE@Work's core offer is designed to assist companies to improve their workforce development programmes and enable employers to access higher level academically recognised qualifications normally based on in-company learning. HE@Work, in partnership with UVAC, supports companies to gain access to work-based learning accreditation and validation arrangements, expertise and campus-based qualifications with HE partners and set up all the necessary systems and processes to meet company requirements.

Response to the UKCES Strategic Plan Consultation

Question 1: What are the appropriate goals for the employment and skills systems for the next five years to 2014?

In addition to established qualification and productivity targets, UVAC would suggest the following:

1. To recognise work-based and vocational qualifications as equal in value to established academic qualifications and to establish understood and widely available progression routes from work-based and vocational qualifications for young people (at school, college and work-based) and adults to higher level skills programmes.
2. To increase the proportion of employers using HEIs, FECs and training providers to develop the skills of their workforce (appropriate national targets could be established for employer spend, proportion of the workforce engaged, qualification attained etc.)
3. To support and maximise the value and benefits, recognise and, where appropriate, validate learning conducted in the workplace. i.e. the workplace should have far greater recognition than it currently does as a learning environment.
4. For the publicly funded employment and skills systems to stimulate and increase employer and individual spend on learning (again it could be possible to establish appropriate national targets).
5. To tackle inequalities in participation rates and strive for equality of opportunity for all. Again, appropriate targets should be reviewed, revised and/or developed.

Question 2: What strategies will enable us to achieve these goals?

UVAC would suggest:

1. **Recognising and maximising the fundamental role the UK's universities and further education colleges have to play in developing and enhancing the higher level skills of those entering and those already in employment.** For too long, state policies on skills development for those in the workforce, particularly in England have been too associated with level 2 and level 3 and the role and expertise of our HE sector (despite excellent examples of good practice) has not been sufficiently utilised, particularly in respect of developing the skills of those in work.
2. **Bridging the FE and HE divide.** Despite the rhetoric, 'vocational' and work-based progression routes from level 3 programmes to higher education are woefully under-developed and under-utilised. This is particularly the case with

Apprenticeship, where approximately only 2 – 4% of Apprentices¹ currently progress to higher education. There should also be greater synergy developed in delivering coherent FE and HE based solutions to employers – through HE and FE collaboration.

3. **Encouraging and supporting the development of a highly responsive learning system.** This would enable higher level work-based learning of whatever 'size' to be supported, recognised and validated for the maximum benefit of an employer and individual learner.
4. **Ensuring coherence in UK employment and skills systems.** We recognise the different policies and approaches in the four UK nations. We would, however, note that having worked with multi-national companies we know that one of the key problems for multi-site companies is the varying approaches, particularly in respect of funding in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland that can act as a disincentive to employer engagement.
5. **Above all, fostering the development of a customer focused system where the needs of individual learners and employers are paramount.** This will also involve avoiding a sole focus on 'flavour of the month' products and organisations – foundation degrees, for example, have a core role to play in raising skill levels, but so do other HE qualifications; HNDs/HNCs, NVQ 4 and 5, professional qualification and not least honours and post-graduate degrees. A vast array of organisations and in particular deliverers of learning and skills e.g. HEIs, FECs and private training providers have a fundamental role to play (and a track record of working with employers). Accordingly, although having an important role to play, SSCs should be seen as 'a' but not 'the' voice of employers. Employers will want to continue to raise skills related issues and establish solutions by working directly with HEIs, FECs and private training providers and through professional bodies and trade associations.

Question 3: What changes does the current system need – some of which might be changes to the 'demand side' (e.g. employers and individuals) and some to the 'supply side' (education and training providers, employment services, qualification bodies etc)

UVAC would suggest:

1. **Stimulating Employer Investment in Learning.** The UKCES should work with partners to stimulate UK employer investment (in both the public and private sector) in learning and skills. Appropriate fiscal measures should encourage and reward employers for investing in staff development and public funding systems should be used to support and develop employer co-funding delivery models. It may be appropriate to establish international benchmarks and set targets to monitor and report upon employer investment in learning.

¹ Vic Seddon, An Analysis of the Progression of Advanced Apprentices to Higher Education in England, UVAC, Bolton 2005

2. **Stimulating Individual Investment in Learning.** Attitudinal and cultural change is needed to support more individuals and in particular employees to regard time and resource spent on learning as an investment. Such change will require more information to be collated, analysed and published on the benefits and returns on particular types of learning, courses and qualifications.
3. **Continuing to Develop a Responsive ‘Demand Side’.** More support is needed to support education and training providers to become more responsive to the needs of employers as well as learners. The ‘system’ e.g. funding and quality regimes should be reviewed and revised to enable innovation, flexibility in delivery and development of bespoke solutions for employers while maintaining and enhancing quality standards. There should be more flexibility to enable individual HEIs and FECs to develop innovative and flexible approaches to support the workforce development needs of employers and their employees.
4. **Ensuring the Knowledge and Experience of Those Who Actually Deliver is Fully Recognised and Utilised** - The ‘system’ should pay attention to the views of deliverers i.e. further education colleges, universities and training providers (and their staff) and their representative bodies in the development and delivery of policy. Working with representative bodies e.g. AoC, ALP, UUK, UVAC etc. the UK CES should develop approaches to ensure that those running and those working for the UK’s universities, colleges, training providers and staff delivering learning can play a full role in advising and supporting the ‘system’.

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