The role of employers and college staff within work-based and work-related learning programmes in Scotland and England: change and continuity

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1.   Introduction
This paper reports on findings from a comparative research project which is examining how work-based learning (WBL) and work-related learning (WRL) are being incorporated into Higher National (HN) programmes in Scotland and Foundation Degrees (FDs) in England[1]. It draws on qualitative interviews with learners, employers and programme organisers. The particular focus of this paper is to explore the potentially changing roles of employers and college staff in supporting students' learning.

2.   Background and Context of the Study
Scotland and England now have systems of work-related higher education which differ from each other in important respects (Gallacher *et al*, 2006). In Scotland higher national certificates/diplomas (HNC/Ds), requiring the equivalent of one or two years of full-time study respectively, continue to provide the main framework for vocationally-focused higher education (HE) qualifications, while in England there has been a decisive move away from this provision towards foundation degrees (requiring the equivalent of two years of full-time study).

Within both systems examples of WBL and WRL can be found. A number of commentators have pointed to the variety of terms which are used in practice and in the literature, and the difficulties of pinning down categories (Brennan and Little, 2006). In this paper the term WBL will be used to describe activities that involve students being located in, and hopefully learning from, the workplace; while WRL will refer to the wider set of learning activities which focus on work, but which may take place either on campus or in the workplace.

The policy framework for the development of FDs has strongly emphasised the importance of WBL (DfES, 2004). Employer involvement in both design and delivery is viewed as a key feature of these new programmes, and in particular their role in assessment is highlighted. In Scotland there has not been the same explicit emphasis on employer involvement or WBL, however the need to relate the qualifications to work is an important theme. The Leitch Report (2006), which seeks to establish a new framework for skills development in the UK, confirms the emphasis on increasing employer engagement. The Scottish Government's Skills Strategy, while taking a

distinctive approach, also raises the profile of skill training issues (Scottish Government, 2007). Therefore while policies in both countries are aiming to reshape skills development at this level, it is in FD policy that we see the strongest attempts to change the relationship between employers and higher education, and to establish a larger role for employers. However research in this area has noted that engaging employers in work-based learning can be problematic (Brennan and Little, 2006). Our study provides an opportunity to examine whether there are differences in the ways that FD and HN programmes approach these issues, and to ask, what evidence is there of employer engagement, and are the roles of workplace and college staff changing within these programmes?

3.   Methodological Approaches

The paper draws on empirical work to explore, in-depth, three case studies within each country, thus six programmes in total. The comparative element was maintained by selecting cases within the same three sectors in each country, Early Years, Hospitality/Travel and Fashion. Clearly, in deciding to focus in-depth on a limited number of case studies we cannot claim that the outcomes of the research are representative of the vast field of FD or HN provision where one can find considerable variety within each country as well as between them (Reeve *et al*, 2007). However, care has been taken to ensure that a range of approaches to WBL and WRL are present (see below).

Data was gathered through a number of means including issuing questionnaires to all students and undertaking semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of them. Semi-structured interviews, where possible, were also conducted with appropriate employers, and representatives of employers, from the three subject areas. In total, 111 student questionnaires were completed, which represented an 87% response rate, while a total of 43 interviews (30 with students and 13 with employers and other stakeholders) were conducted. The majority of employer interviews were obtained in the Early Years sector as it proved extremely difficult to secure interviews with employers in the Hospitality/Travel and Fashion sectors. Interviews were also carried out with the programme organisers.

4.   Approaches to WBL and WRL within our Case Studies

Our sample of programmes is of course small but nevertheless a range of approaches to WBL or WRL can be found. Within the Early Years sector there are a number of key differences between the English and Scottish examples. The Early Years FD is a part-time course aimed at those already in employment in a relevant role. It attracts mature learners (all are over 21) and requires them to draw on their existing work role in order to complete a number of course modules. Students on the full-time HNC course are younger (most are under 21) and have very little or no previous work experience of the sector. They undertake 3 placement blocks within the same Early Years setting. Despite these different starting points there are a number of similarities in the approaches used on the programmes as we will see below.

The two case studies selected from the Hospitality/Travel sector are both full-time programmes attracting predominantly young students. The FD includes

several WBL or WRL elements, including two short placements in the industry, visits to a range of venues, and a number of guest lecturers from industry. The HND programme includes optional WRL units which take place within the college via a simulated aircraft cabin and a reservation and call centre which uses industry standard software.

Within the Fashion sector both programmes are also full-time and attract a mainly young cohort. The FD has a wide range of WBL and WRL elements including project work which is set by industry professionals (and completed on campus), short placements in the industry, and joint teaching sessions located in a non-commercial workplace. The HNC includes two short periods of practical work with photographers. The first, organised by the college, takes place on campus. The second, organised by the student, takes place off campus.

As the above indicates, in our sample, the extent of WBL and WRL was greater in the FD programmes than in the HNs. In the part-time FD there was ongoing contact with the employer, and in both full-time FDs we found a series of WBL or WRL activities which involved a number of different employers. Nevertheless, interesting examples of WRL and even WBL can also be found amongst the HNs, although, with the exception of the Early Years case, these might be more limited or even optional opportunities. It is also worth noting that the FD programmes are in each case smaller than the corresponding HN, for example the FD in Hospitality has a cohort of 12 whereas the HND has 40 students. So within our small sample the indications are that employer engagement is resulting in a wider range of WBL and WRL activities for FD students. In the remaining part of the paper we will explore the relationships that are developing as the result of these engagements, and add a little more detail to this initial picture.

5.   Emerging Themes
Despite the different overall levels of employer engagement which exist between the FD and HN frameworks when individual programmes are examined, and the experiences of learners, employers and programme staff on them, it is the similarities across the two countries that emerge most strongly. A key finding of our research is that differences within sectors are much more significant in terms of influencing roles and relationships, than are differences between the FD and HN structures. We will explore just a few of the emerging themes from the research to illustrate this point.

Making contacts: personal and professional networks
In our sample there were clear differences in how programmes in the different sectors approached employer engagement. In the Early Years sector contacts between employers and the course staff appear rooted in local professional networks, and longstanding links to local councils and schools exist. Students on the HNC are offered a placement through the programme, usually with a large provider, and a suitable work-based 'placement supervisor' is identified for them. On the FD it is usually students who initiate contact with the programme and then seek the agreement of their employer. Although recruiting work-based students has avoided the hurdle of finding placements,

students still have to find a senior person in the workplace, a 'mentor', who will support their learning. Where no suitably qualified person is available then local professional networks are drawn upon; in this case the 'link tutor' system organised by the local authority (local government administration). Through this route a qualified practitioner from another setting would be identified to take on a mentoring role. Thus within the Early Years sector contacts between employers and the institution appear to be highly structured and to draw on existing local networks.

In contrast, in the Fashion and the Hospitality/Travel sectors the process of engaging with employers appears to be much more dependent on the professional, and sometimes personal, networks of individual programme organisers. As one put it *'...because I've worked in this sector for a long time as had X, then we knew a lot of people and called in favours'* (Programme Organiser, Hospitality FD). Considerable effort goes into developing and maintaining useful contacts. Here, their experiences mirror those of staff on foundation degrees elsewhere (Hillier, 2008) who expend considerable effort in maintaining relationships, and also in renewing contacts when the original employer contact point has moved on. There is some evidence that programme organisers in our case studies are beginning to target alumni from the course for further contributions. Thus employer contacts in these sectors appear to be part of a network which centres on the individual programme organiser, where other links and histories may be present between them, and where work is always in process to maintain the relationships. However, despite exploring all avenues/personal networks there is only so much that can be achieved. In both the FDs in these sectors responsibility for arranging placements is largely devolved to students. As one programme organiser put it the application process is part of their 'entrepreneurship training'. In a similar way on the Fashion HNC, responsibility for contacting photographers and working with them on one of their photo shoots rests with the students.

Supporting learners: sectoral differences
The sectoral differences that we highlight above also impact on the roles that workplace staff take in supporting students. In both Early Years programmes students reported mainly positive experiences with their mentors (FD) or supervisors (HNC). For example, on the part-time FD, Rachel benefited from a lot of support from her employer/mentor Pat.

> *Yes she's helped me a lot with all the, you know she's given me lot's of books to look through, she's very good at helping me with getting ideas for assignments and things I've got to do.* (Rachel, part-time Early Years FD student)

Pat also provided practical help by enabling Rachel to work with older children for some sessions, providing access to computers to type up her assignments at work or access the internet, and letting her leave early on college nights. Other students have also benefited from some flexibility around work schedules and from access to books and other resources. FD students with link tutors as mentors reported mixed experiences, with one being reluctant to 'disturb them', because they were located elsewhere. On the HNC, part of the

supervisors' role is to help the full-time students to work through an agenda of required topics which are set by the college.

> *Because they come out with lists of things which they have to do within their weeks with us... – they've got to look at this child within the play situation, you know ... we'll come up with ideas and they'll come up with ideas and between the two of us we'll work together to try and give them a good insight into what to look for and how to write it up.* (Margaret, Placement Supervisor and Employer, Early Years HNC)

Here, Margaret appears to be taking on quite a significant role in guiding the student towards making an appropriate intervention with the child. Such an investment of time is justified because they are viewed as 'future employees' for the sector.

In other sectors there is limited evidence that workplace staff are much involved in supporting students' learning. Students who went on placements had a range of experiences but few reported that they received significant guidance or learning support from their employer. Students on the Hospitality FD who had short placements working for a music festival cited the pressure on permanent employees as a factor, and suggested that awareness of this inhibited students from disturbing them, so they 'just got on with it'. For others it was the relative unfamiliarity of these workplace staff that would lead them to view the tutor as the main support even for the placement.

> *… you look at the person that you're going onto placement with as an employer so there's that kind of barrier there whereas I feel more comfortable in talking to [tutor].* (Beatrice, full-time Hospitality FD student)

Interestingly, several of the FD Fashion students who secured placements in small organizations reported receiving good support from work colleagues, with one working extremely closely with the owner of a small boutique and learning a lot from her. Presumably, in such micro organizations, it is easier to make one's presence felt. Students on the Fashion HNC also indicated that relationships with photographers, with whom they work with on the fashion shoots, can vary considerably. Some become engaged with the students to help them achieve the best results, while others show no interest in becoming involved in this way.

> *Sometimes …he'll direct you and he'll direct the model and he'll be brilliant and then other times you'll get somebody else and they're just kind of wanting to take the pictures and take the cash.* (Kay, full-time Fashion HNC student)

The photographer who was interviewed for our project did indicate a high level of engagement with the students and emphasized his aim is to stimulate the student's creativity and to introduce them to the speed of the 'real' world.

So far we have not mentioned assessment, which as we indicated above is an area where English policy is promoting a more active role for employers. This is an issue which requires more space than we can devote to it here. However, briefly, our data illustrates how far employers are willing to go, and not go, with assessment. In the Early Years cases we found many examples where employers are providing advice to students/employees on how to approach assignments and how to write them up. And, uniquely, those supporting students on placements for the HNC in Early Years do make judgements which are part of the assessment process. Elsewhere some courses ask employers for formative feedback on student performance. The data that we were able to gather from employers and programme organisers showed that they were in agreement that any expansion of this role, towards summative assessment, was undesirable and unrealistic.

Identity issues: maintaining boundaries and crossing them
When policy seeks to promote greater employer engagement, questions arise about the roles of employers and the extent to which these are changing. To what extent are the boundaries being disturbed between on and off campus learning support, or trained and untrained educators? In our sample a number of employers sought to maintain the position of programme staff as the main source of support for students and to distinguish their contribution from teaching. For example, Helen contrasts her style to the formal lessons students receive and goes on to say *'I'm not delivering training, I don't feel I am doing formally I am doing informally on the hoof within the job'.* (Helen, Placement Supervisor and Employer, Early Years HNC)

Similarly the photographer above was careful to clarify that he does not see his role as being a tutor or assessor, and in the preparation for their photo shoots students are supported by their tutors. The employer who takes on a role which appears to approach most closely a teaching role is Deborah. She co-delivers sessions, which take place in her workplace, where students have an input from a university lecturer followed by her own practical session on investigating the style and composition of various garments. She explained how her input contrasts with, but complements, the more academic approach of the lecturer. Deborah provides verbal feedback on the way the students are progressing, but she stresses *'I cannot go beyond because this is an extra bit to my normal job and also I'm not a trained educator.'* (Deborah, Employer Fashion FD). Therefore, irrespective of sector, it appears that workplace staff that are 'engaged' by the programmes in our sample retain established views of college staff as responsible for teaching and ultimately for standards.

There are however an important group of staff that do cross the boundaries, which are implied above, between industry and education. In both Fashion (FD and HNC) and in the Hospitality FD, significant numbers of part-time tutors are employed who also have an active part-time, usually self-employed, role in the industry. Their contribution may be overlooked in an analysis which focuses on WBL or WRL activities, but it is clear from the student interviews that they make an important contribution to supporting learning about the industry. Kerry, a student on the Fashion FD, described how, despite their very different outlooks, it was the part-time lecturer who was 'inspirational' in

opening up her thinking about draping fabric. It appears that it was his professional credibility as a designer which enables her to take his knowledge about fabric on board - *'because I knew he actually is a designer, he lectures here, but also he has his own company, I guess it's the respect for him and what he does.'* (Kerry, full-time Fashion FD student). Another fashion student, this time on the HNC, explicitly referred to the importance of having tutors who are still in the industry and up to date with techniques, she cites it as her main reason for joining the course.

6. Conclusions

In this paper we have attempted to trace the responses of a sample of FD and HN programmes to the current policy pressure to engage, in different ways, more closely with employers. Our sample suggests that FDs are engaging with employers to a greater extent than are HNs; particularly in terms of the range and extent of WBL and WRL offered. However this simplistic picture is disturbed when we look in more detail at the experiences of learners, employers and programme staff, and the roles that they take. Here we have highlighted the sectoral differences as more significant than the differences in FD and HN frameworks. The context of the Early Years sector, drawing as it does on traditions of mentoring which were already established in the sector and the wider field of education, has encouraged workplace staff to take on a significant role in student support in both the FD and HNC. However, these staff are careful to distinguish their roles from those of trained educators, and to identify tutors as the source of course standards. There appears some reluctance, even here, to become involved in summative assessment. Where this is happening, ironically on the HNC programme, supervisors continue to refer to it as providing 'feedback', and retain a view of tutors as the final arbiter. There is therefore perhaps more evidence of continuity, with existing practices and roles, than change.

Elsewhere, in the Fashion and Hospitality/Travel sectors, the roles of employers are more limited and/or focused on a brief input. Hence college staff remain the main source of support for students, even for the WBL or WRL elements. However the tradition of part-time or portfolio working which is established in these sectors provides an opportunity for colleges to draw experienced people from industry onto their staff. Thus they have become employed by the college rather than simply engaged by them. Again this is not a new phenomenon, but arises from the existing context of the sector.

So a complex picture can be observed. There are similarities in the role of employers in supporting learning across the two countries and these have emerged in response to the characteristics of the sectors. Nevertheless, it appears that the FD framework does encourage college/university staff to increase the range and extent of WBL and WRL, in comparison with HNs. However, in doing so, they take on the significant task of maintaining these relationships with employers, and this may be more possible within smaller FD cohorts.

Notes

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