Research Note

Issues Arising from a Study of Workforce Development Policy in Higher Education

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Abstract: *Initiatives to develop workforce development educational provision at the institutional level are widespread within UK Higher Education and have been increasingly encouraged by policy makers through HEFCE funding streams since the publication of the Leitch report in 2006. These activities aim to bring employers and Higher Education institutions together to develop work-based programmes that will meet sectoral skill requirements with an orientation towards knowledge that emphasises contextual specificity rather than 'vertical' disciplinary structure (Bernstein, 1999). The research project outlined here aims to explore key unresolved issues which relate to the relationship of workforce development provision to other institutional activities, how such provision achieves validity, and the dynamics of relationships between employer, employee and institution. As policy outputs are continually iterated by the contexts in which they are implemented (Barrett, 2004), the research approach focuses on sites of implementation, the intentions of policy actors, and the norms that characterise the environment into which policy is introduced.*

Introduction

Workforce development, in the shape of the provision of education for employees in the workplace, is an increasingly significant part of what some Higher Education (HE) institutions in the UK provide, alongside more traditional provision for full-time and part-time students. The policies of the previous government, stemming from the Leitch report (Leitch, 2006), resulted in new funding streams available from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and a series of capacity building projects at various institutions in England. These projects ranged from activity that built on previous partnerships and provision to ambitious cultural and infrastructural change across institutions. This brief overview aims to identify some key issues that a study of these projects, and the policy environment into which they have been introduced, has highlighted. Key issues that pertain to studies in this area include the nature of the partnerships formed between universities and employers, the type of provision developed and ways in which this provision is 'valuable' or 'valid', and the claims of equity and access that are often used to reinforce notions of validity. Research in this area aims to identify the likely outcomes of policy implementation, based on the assertion that policy will evolve in negotiation with the context in which it is implemented (Hill and Hupe, 2002; Barrett, 2004) and the spectrum of actions available to actors at street level (Lipsky, 1980). Research has proceeded through analysis of policy and project documents and interviews with those managing projects within institutions.

New Types of Provision and the Role of the Institution

Higher Education at Work (DIUS, 2008, p 7) stated that the government wants 'to see universities working with Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and local employers to develop the high level skills that a particular business (or business community) needs in a particular sector in a particular place'. The document also suggests that skill needs identified in Sector Skills Agreements should be considered in the HEFCE annual grant letter. This suggests a role for arbiters of knowledge value that sit outside traditional disciplinary structures as part of a 'nationalisation' of educational

knowledge (Young, 2007, p 98). It also reflects positions that suggest that previous knowledge hierarchies are increasingly redundant, overtaken by Mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons *et al*, 1994) and the accelerating imperatives of industry and society. New forms of provision would need, in the longer term, to pass tests of validity and coherence if they wish to acquire recognition within those HE institutions that value 'traditional' disciplinary coherence and maintain a distinction between the verticality and horizontality of discourses (Bernstein, 1999). The attention drawn to specific businesses and places in Higher Education at Work suggests that certain types of workforce development provision might not achieve great esteem within such institutions, however successful in attracting student numbers and in supporting the self-development of employee-students. As the emphasis in workforce development provision is on 'know-how' rather than 'know-why' (Muller, 2009) in the spirit of professional-technical education, opportunities for 'circulation' and 'exchange' (Bernstein, 1999) of strategies and techniques will be necessary to form a body of knowledge that can evolve to meet practitioner needs. This may not evolve effectively if influenced unduly by the politically-driven 'nationalisation' processes referred to above.

If universities are no longer seen as performing the role of key societal arbiters of knowledge validity, then coherence with norms of 'appropriacy' (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991) within institutions may be dismissed as unimportant, if identifiable institution-wide norms exist in the complex multifaceted enterprises HE institutions have become. The notion of a 'culture clash' between universities and employers is mentioned in 'Higher Education at Work' (DIUS, 2008, p 27), and it is the employers' claim that universities do not understand business that is given precedence. However, a further issue is whether there is a risk of such clashes occurring in the context of the average contemporary HE institution, where diverse activities occur at a range of locations with a variety of partners, clients and students. Can workforce development activity co-exist easily with everything else in a modern 'multiversity' (Kerr, 2001) and not compromise institutional mission or brand? Through workforce development provision, as in industrial research, are institutions offered an opportunity to influence the development of new industrially and technologically driven knowledge 'regions' (Muller, 2009), thereby providing a bridge to more structured and established knowledge for new creators of knowledge who sit outside the institution?

Equity of Opportunity and Partnership Dynamics

A related issue is that of how the university treats employees who become their students as a result of the encouragement of their employer. An employee without prior higher education qualifications who is provided with an opportunity to study at higher level directly related to their work may, under current or future interpretations of Equivalent Level Qualification regulations, find themselves at a disadvantage financially if they subsequently decide they wish to study something else. Claims from higher skills project managers that these employees are 'a different market' (personal communication with project manager at HE Institution) might seem insensitive to those for whom choice of university or course of study had been made by others through an employer-institution partnership. However, this point may be substantially outweighed by the benefits provided by those workforce development projects that genuinely enable access to HE, career progression and better equity in the competition for advancement in the workplace. Considering the volumes of graduates now entering the labour market and concomitant credential inflation, previous generations may feel that they deserve some opportunity to level the qualification playing fields, particularly in the face of an intensification of competition for advantage in the workplace (Brown and Lauder, 2006; Lauder, Brown, Dillabough and Halsey, 2006). If employee-students are unhappy with a programme, however, institutions find themselves negotiating not only with a student, but also with an employer, who may also have contributed to programme funding under the HEFCE co-funding model. This may require a partnership dynamic that is new to

some institutions, necessitating a reinterpretation or extension of the role of the academic or an opportunity for the growth of 'third space' professionals (Deem, Hillyard and Reed, 2008; Whitchurch, 2008).

Policy Implementation Issues

The implementation approach has primarily involved carrots rather than sticks, offering generous capacity building funds to institutions and the development of an institution-employer 'co-funding' model additional to the existing grant. Overall the objective was '*to test and invest in new approaches*' (DIUS, 2008, p 31), but also to build on the partnerships developed through Foundation degrees. If the provision developed by the HEFCE-funded workforce development partnerships is the output of policy, what outcomes are these outputs aiming to achieve, and what is the likelihood of realising them? For this we need to understand the logic set out in the Leitch report, how education is central to industrial policy (Stedward, 2003) and has become 'gospel' (Grubb and Lazerson, 2004), and how the realities of the 'competition state' (Cerny, 1997) and 'magnet economy' (Brown and Lauder, 2006) narrow the scope of available policy to those governments committed to current forms of globalising capitalism. The stated key policy outcome is increased productivity and economic growth through higher skills levels, although we might justifiably ask whether HEFCE investment might also have other unstated objectives, namely supporting HE institutions maintain revenue levels and expand into new markets, or to make good the pledges of politicians to expand access to HE. More generally, as with all policy implementation in complex environments, there are also likely to be outcomes that were both unintended and unforeseen (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984; Hill and Hupe, 2002).

Research Programme

This project is currently in progress, and involves the analysis of policy documents, institutional strategies and evidence submitted to the IUSS (Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills) Select Committee enquiry 'After Leitch: Implementing Skills and Training Policies', in addition to a series of interviews with those managing workforce development projects. From this material key themes are identified with the aim of better understanding the context in which this policy implementation is taking place, issues elicited by workforce development activity and HE-employer partnerships, and the outcomes that arise as a consequence of the implementation process. The aim will be to produce an analysis of those factors that are proving most influential in shaping the implementation of workforce development policy.

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