

Paper presented by Prof Simon Roodhouse at the Work-based Learning Futures III conference, University of Derby, April 2009.

HE@WORK: SECOND SURVEY OF LARGE PRIVATE BUSINESSES, 2009

ABSTRACT

HE@Workⁱ conducted a survey in 2008 of large businesses employing over 2000 people which provided a snapshot insight into employee attitudes in large organisations in the United Kingdom and an indication of the views of employees about work-based learning and its value to them. The most important finding from the poll was that people in employment wanted to develop further and would be motivated to better their performance in their current jobs if they received more externally accredited training. In particular:

- 75% of respondents had failed to achieve their potential in full time education and wished they had achieved more
- about three quarters haven't achieved their potential at work regardless of their educational level
- on average 80% wanted to continue to develop and the more qualified people were the keenest to progress further (87%). 67% of people with no qualifications at all would also welcome the opportunity to develop professionally.
- those who get vocational or specialist professional qualifications find them very valuable and more valuable than they expected

In 2009 HE@Work completed the same survey focused on the same constituency this time in an economic recession. So, for example, there has been a noticeable downward shift in employee value of training and development and a reported increase in those that hold higher degrees. This paper presents the results of the most recent study and compares it with last year.

Introduction

It is important to understand the attitudes to learning in the work place, particularly by employees, as the focus of national policy suggests in the Higher Education Consultation Paper published by the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS): "Around three-quarters of the 2020 workforce have already left compulsory education. So we need more people currently in the workforce to acquire high level skills." This, however, is a complex and poorly understood component of government policy, and does not lend itself to generalization. Part of that complexity is the individual nature of businesses with their distinctive cultures. This is also mirrored in the university sector with high levels of individuality reflected in their missions thus compounding the complexity. Meeting national or regional economic needs might only be one component of corporate university activity and of limited interest to academic departments.

On the other hand, Waterhouse (2002) seeks to explain university employer engagement by focusing our attention on technical education as the point of contact. He suggests that “A fundamental part of education, wherever it occurs, is technical. Technical education is not simply practical, it is about particular types of action to make and manipulate physical things. Technical learning begins at birth. Technical education as a specific social institution began when techniques had reached a certain level of complication and sophistication.” This gave birth in Europe to the apprenticeship system, with its overlay of secret knowledge and mystique. In spite of the printing press, the computer, and communications technology, the restrictive practices of these medieval guilds are still with us – known today as professional bodies or associations such as the General Medical Council, the Law Society or the Institute of Civil Engineering. This concept of technical education as a social institution has often been distinguished from vocationalism; “a vocation is a calling, and the highest vocation, certainly in Europe, is to the priesthood and the European universities were invented to deliver vocational education in the strictest of senses. They were set up by the Church to train clerks, i.e. clerics. Indeed, all the great civilizations of the old world had similar institutions with an identical purpose” (Waterhouse, 2002). These origins are still evident today in the oldest universities. They were essentially the training colleges of their day. Consequently, the ultimate value proposition for universities, Waterhouse argues, “is not that they can teach, nor even that they can sell research, but that they can assess: they accredit learning and are awarding bodies. It is this social certification of successful learning that individuals, employers and ultimately society pay for.” The next reinvention for the sector is contemporary vocationalisation and responsiveness to economic imperatives rather than learning. So what is being said here is that universities have engaged in a form of vocationalisation and that technical needs of business have generally been met outside the system,” (Roodhouse & Swailes, 2007)

Consequently the purpose behind undertaking the surveys was to understand more of employee attitudes to work based learning because it seems employers will only endorse higher level workplace learning if it motivates their employees in ways that support business objectives. A report commissioned by the Higher Education Academy, Work Based Learning Impact Study and published in July 2008ⁱⁱ endorsed the importance of employee attitudes to learning for employers:

“The employees tended to be the driving force behind the willingness of the employer to support them in engaging in a programme of study. Even when the programme was part of an employer-university partnership, it was the willingness of the employee that influenced the uptake of the programme.” (Nixon, 2008)

On the other hand, employers chose work based programmes of study, it is suggested in the same report, for the following reasons:

- “fitted well into the work schedule
 - required employees to be away from their place of work for a minimal amount of time
 - provided an opportunity to influence change in the workplace
 - linked theory to practical day-to-day issues faced by the business”
- (Nixon, 2008a)

This can be summarized as a strategic business “fit” with minimal work disruption to employees and the company.

For the purposes of the surveys and this paper it is helpful to establish a definitional parameter. Work based learning is concerned with learning in, through and for work using tools such as accreditation of prior learning and experience, critical reflection, personal development planning and experiential learning. Garnett suggests when this is placed in a university context, "it encourages high level critical thinking on work to facilitate recognition, acquisition, and application of individual knowledge, skills and abilities to achieve outcomes of significance to the learner, their work and the university." (Garnett, Costley & Workman, 2009, 189) A government-sponsored review (Brennan and Little, 1996) recognised that work-based learning could take many forms including a full-time undergraduate undertaking a work placement planned as part of the curriculum; a full-time undergraduate doing a part-time job; a full-time employee seeking to explore work focused and work-related issues in the context of the knowledge, skills and values of a higher education institution. The common factor linking these forms was that the individual would be doing a job of work, or would be undertaking a work role.

HE@Work commissioned employee surveys in 2008 and 2009 to begin to identify trends. OnePoll were chosen in 2008 to undertake a survey over a 5 week period of employees in the United Kingdom, working for private and public businesses in a variety of industrial sectors which typically employ over 2000 people. It was an attempt to gain a large private sector organisation employee insight to inform discussions with employers, test employer engagement strategies and to build ways of collaborating with organisations to help them add external credibility to existing training, recognise and reward employees, and strengthen recruitment and retention appeal.

This was based on a self completed web-based questionnaire offered to 50,000 members of a polling network and completed by over 4,600. The essential characteristic for the poll was that everyone should be in full time employment with a large employer as defined earlier. Data was collected by age, gender, type of role and sector.

As this study used a self-completing questionnaire, the results are considered as indicative since the absolute levels of response may not be statistically valid. The analysis therefore focuses on the ranking of responses rather than absolute levels. In addition the survey does not identify individual companies but did include regional location. Therefore it is more of an opinion poll and snapshot in time.

However, in order to generate longitudinality, OnePoll were commissioned again in 2009 to carry out as nearly as possible the same survey using the same dataset and definition of large business. It was again a self completing questionnaire as previously and the number of respondents almost identical, with 4728 in 2008 and 4514 in the 2009 survey. What follows are the key findings of the 2009 survey compared with 2008.

Respondent Profile

The gender split is found in figure 1 with a slightly more equitable balance in 2009; nevertheless the dominance of women respondents continues.

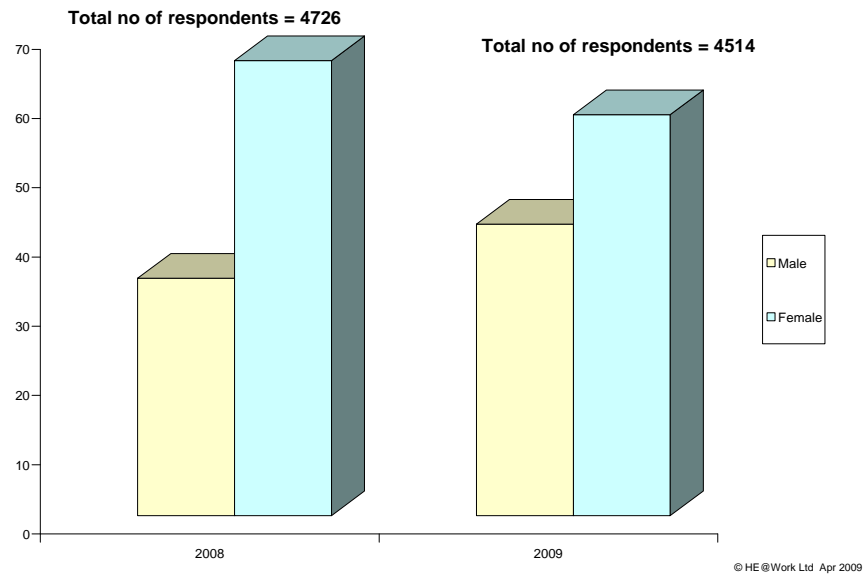


Figure 1

In 2008 the age profile of the majority of respondents were in the age range 25-34 which is precisely the target group mentioned in the Leitch report (Leitch, 2006) as those already in employment who will still be in employment in 2020. 2009 followed a similar pattern however there is a noticeable increase in the number of younger people, (18 – 24yrs) and decline in the older grouping (45 - 54 yrs) illustrated in figure 2.

The mix of ethnic backgrounds reported has shifted slightly. The majority of respondents in both years are White British although this has dropped from just over 80% in 2008 to around 70% in 2009. The increases in 2009 are found in the numbers of Mixed race White and Asian or Black African; Asian or Asian British and Chinese.

Nevertheless there are similar respondent profiles for 2008 – 09 which provides the basis for comparing the survey data results.

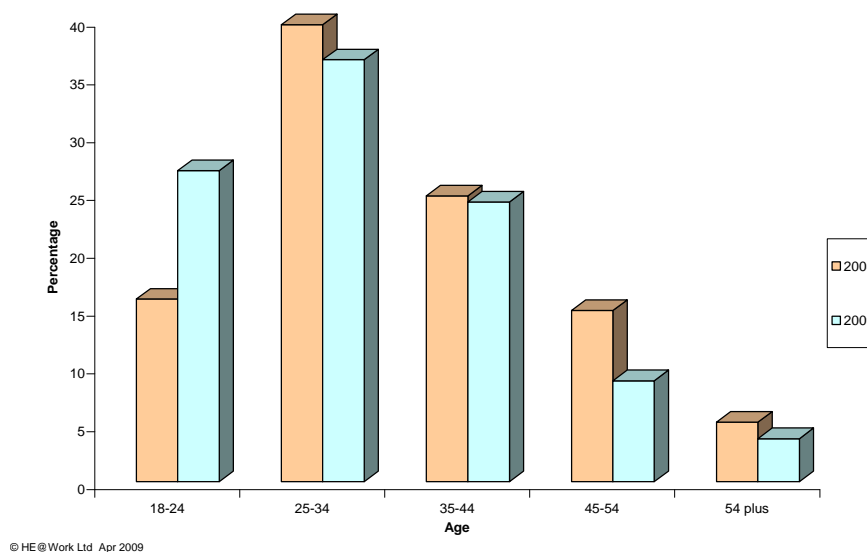


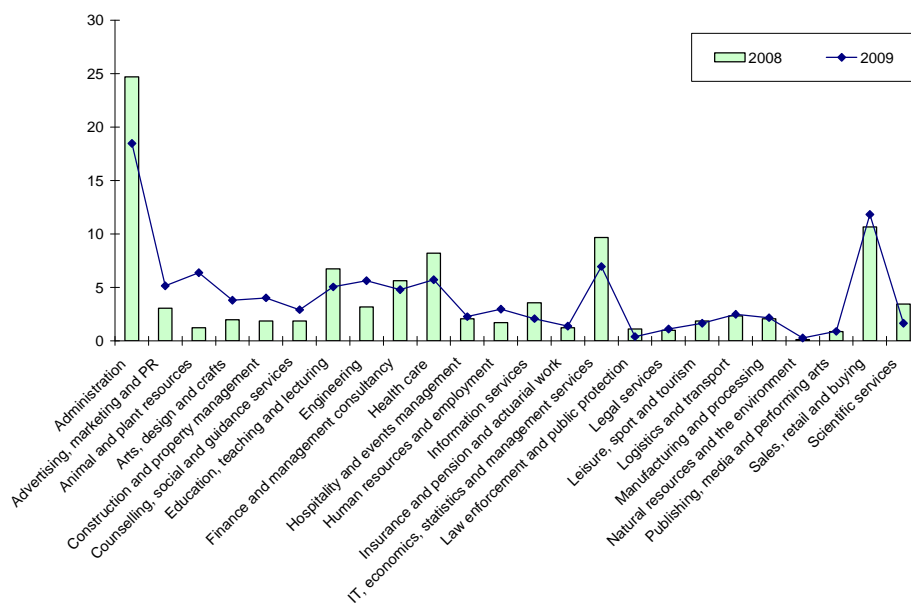
Figure 2

Respondent job roles were also considered in both surveys to provide an insight into the spectrum of jobs covered and the balance. It is clear in both surveys that those working in administration dominate followed by sales, retail, and buying. IT, economics, statistics, and management services are also a significant grouping as described in figure 3. However in 2009 there is growth in the number of respondents working in advertising, marketing and PR; animal and plant resources; art, design, and crafts; as well as construction and property management.

In 2008, there was a wide geographic spread from across the UK with a majority of respondents (33%) coming from London and the South East closely followed by the North West, 14%, and the South West with 13%. The 2009 results were similar with 34% coming from London and the South East, 11% from the North West and 10% from the South West although this year the second highest region was the East Midlands with 14% of respondents, an increase of 5% over 2008.

Data on the level of qualifications achieved by respondents was also collected in 2008 and 2009. However the data is difficult to verify because respondents were asked to tick all the levels of qualifications they had achieved, and there are indicators that this may not have been completed consistently. Nevertheless in 2008, 11% of respondents held postgraduate degrees, 30% with first degrees whilst 21% held other qualifications such as BTEC or City & Guilds and 5% claimed not to have any qualifications at all. This pattern was echoed in 2009 with the exception of those respondents with higher degrees which is noticeably higher, increasing from 11% to 17%

Consequently there is a younger better educated cohort in the 2009 survey but in every other respect the two surveys are closely matched.



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Figure 3

The Value of Learning

Asked whether the 2008 respondents felt they had achieved their learning potential at work almost 75% said no with little distinction between those who were very qualified and those with no qualifications. However when people were asked whether they wanted opportunities to develop professionally more than 80% said yes. Here, those with higher qualifications were keenest to develop, for example 87% of postgraduates wanted to progress further whilst amongst those with no qualifications the figure was significantly less at 67%. (Dunn, Mumford & Roodhouse, 119, 2008).

In the 2009 survey more have reported that they hold Higher Degrees, up 6 percentage points compared with 2008 and there is also an increase in NVQ4/5, HNC/HND category; otherwise the results are similar, see figure 4.

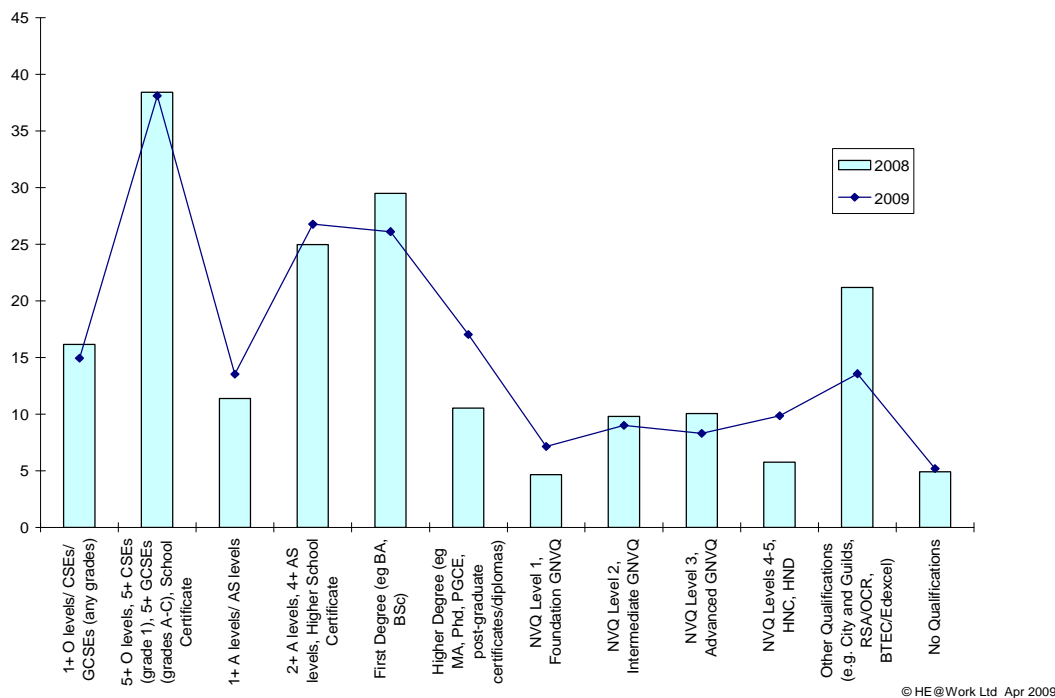


Figure 4

In 2008, when the results were analysed by sector there was a tendency for those in technology based sectors to be keenest on further development (85-90% saying yes) whilst those in sectors like media, hospitality, and building were least keen (60-70% saying yes). There appears to be a correlation between sectors where respondents tended to have lower qualifications and sectors where people were less interested in development.

However in 2009, the sector analysis demonstrated that the science and engineering based sectors continue to be keen to develop further with a 90% positive response. But this year, unlike last, sectors such as hospitality and retail also reported positive responses in the 80-90% range whilst fashion, building services, and environmental and land based industries tended to be least keen to develop further with responses in the range 58-68%. No firm conclusions can be drawn from this that one sector dominates over others,

In 2008, 75% of respondents felt they had failed to achieve their potential in full time education and wished they had achieved more. Two thirds said they would turn the clock back if they could. The result was highest amongst those with the lower qualifications but even 65% of respondents with degrees and 50% of those with post graduate qualifications felt they could have achieved more. (Dunn, Mumford & Roodhouse, 118, 2008).

2009 brought slightly lower results, nevertheless more than 85% of respondents still report that ongoing learning and development is important to both individuals and organisations and more than 75 per cent would like to have more opportunities to develop at work and believe they have yet to achieve their full potential in the workplace. More than 60% still say that they didn't reach their academic potential and would turn the clock back if they could.

However there is a noticeable increase in the number of respondents who believe they have achieved their educational potential, see figure 5.

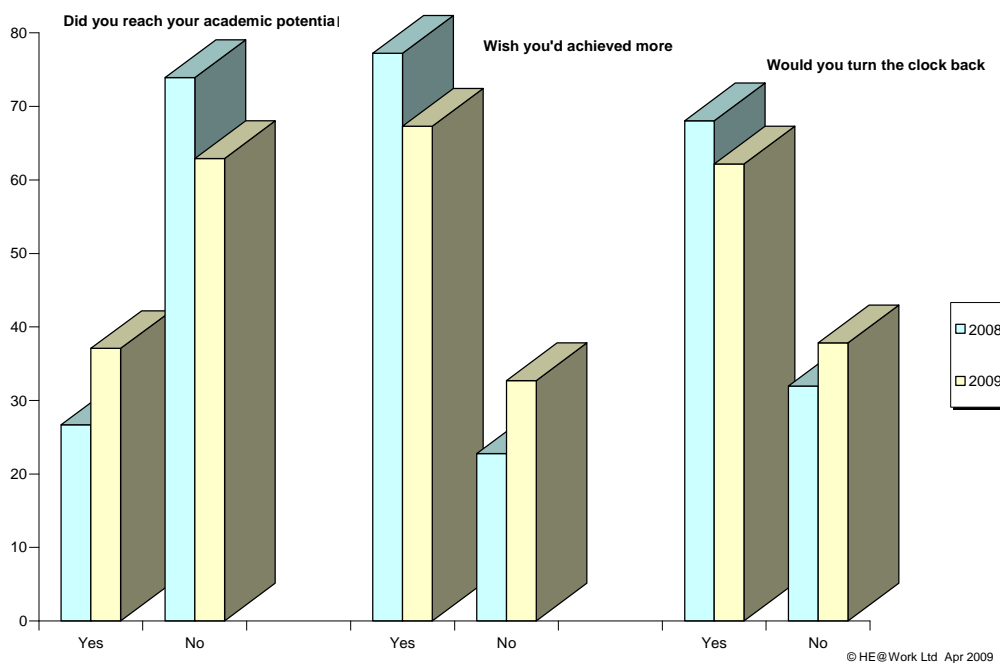


Figure 5

What can be deduced from this is a continuing interest by the 2008 and 2009 cohorts in developing themselves despite the severe negative change in the 2009 economic climate, thus placing a measurable value on learning.

Qualifications and Providers

Qualifications are a formal summation of structured learning processes as approved by an organisation that acts as the quality assurer. They are seen as a symbol of educational attainment and recognition. Often used to gain a job or retain the existing job or determine career progression, they matter to employees.

The table below (Fig. 6) shows the perceived value of qualifications by all respondents, regardless of whether they hold a qualification or not. One surprising result was that around 40% of employees saw no value in qualifications in both surveys. A similar percentage of employees see degrees and vocational qualifications as very valuable. However first and higher degrees do not stand head and shoulders above all other qualifications with the higher level newer NVQ qualifications performing least well which is consistent across both surveys. This is an important message for those who see qualifications as the key measure of skills. It provides support for the observations by Lorna Unwin, "The emphasis on qualifications by the government through targets or campaigns is wrong. The workplace is a natural learning environment, and the government should encourage employers to re-organise their working practices so that staff have more opportunities to learn on the job".ⁱⁱⁱ

Emma Pollard in a 2008 report, “University is Not Just for Young People” for DIUS and Southampton University based on a sample of 1,401 adults said the respondents “appeared to value their work experience in the labour market over their qualifications, [and] tended to feel it was their work experience and their skills and competencies that were important in securing their jobs rather than their qualifications”^{iv}.

O levels and A levels are considered to be of limited value, probably because for employees these are a staging post in educational attainment. The percentage of respondents claiming to have O and A levels was also very low (e.g. less people claimed to have A levels than claimed to have degrees, which is a questionable result) again suggesting that employees do not see these qualifications as anything more than stepping stones to more relevant qualifications. (Dunn, Mumford & Roodhouse, 119a, 2008).

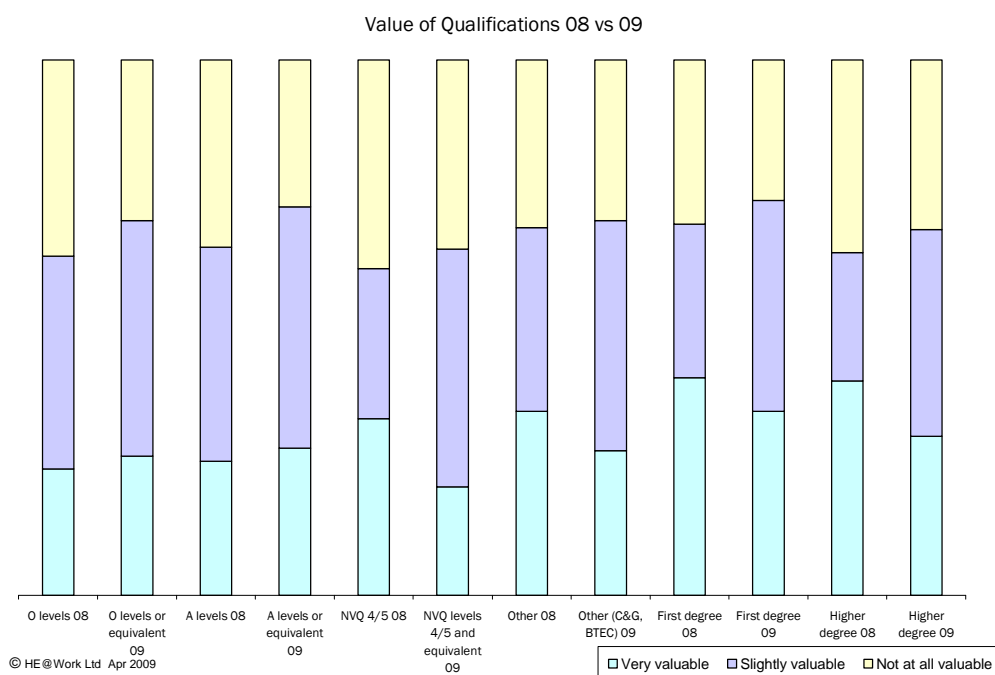


Figure 6

The picture of perceived value of providers is not encouraging for universities with the 2008 survey results indicating that professional bodies and colleges do better, However in 2009 this trend continues with less than 20% of great value responses and employer provision continuing to be preferred with over 35% of great value responses. As James Kewin, Director of Skills and Innovation at CFE said in their report, Known Unknowns: the demand for higher level skills from businesses: “To penetrate the vocational and professional training markets many universities will have to make fundamental changes to the content and delivery of their provision. There is now an expectation that training can be tailored to the needs of an individual business and delivered at a time and place that is convenient to the employer. The challenge for universities is to develop a more flexible approach to delivery without compromising the quality of course content”.

This argument for change is not for every university, nonetheless those with an interest face barriers according to Connor and Hirsch; “We know from a number of studies that there are difficulties faced by higher education, employers and employees in expanding engagement, especially for workforce development. These include:

- High risks involved for universities entering new markets (development costs, lack of experience outside of student market, short-termism of some employer demand, uncertainty on continuity)
- Language and culture barriers for employers and HEIs to overcome
- Motivating employees to see value in engaging in higher learning with a university or college
- Relevance of provision for meeting employer demand
- Accepting the different domains of learning (academic, workplace), and integrating academic and work-based learning better
- Customer service
- Flexibility in processes and products (need to offer customisation, scheduling, smaller bite sized units but retain high quality)
- Lack of awareness among employers, especially small firms, of what HE can potentially offer them”^v

However, for those universities committed to working with employers and employees who have changed their “offer”, there is still a long way to go in terms of awareness raising compared with the direct employer training and professional bodies illustrated in figure 7. This message is reinforced in the CBI, Universities UK and HEFCE joint report^{vi} on the contribution that higher education can make to workforce development: “Workforce development programmes will not be a priority for all universities. But those that do see it as a key activity should regularly tell employers what they can offer and who to contact. As one course provider put it, ‘The key is visibility.’ “

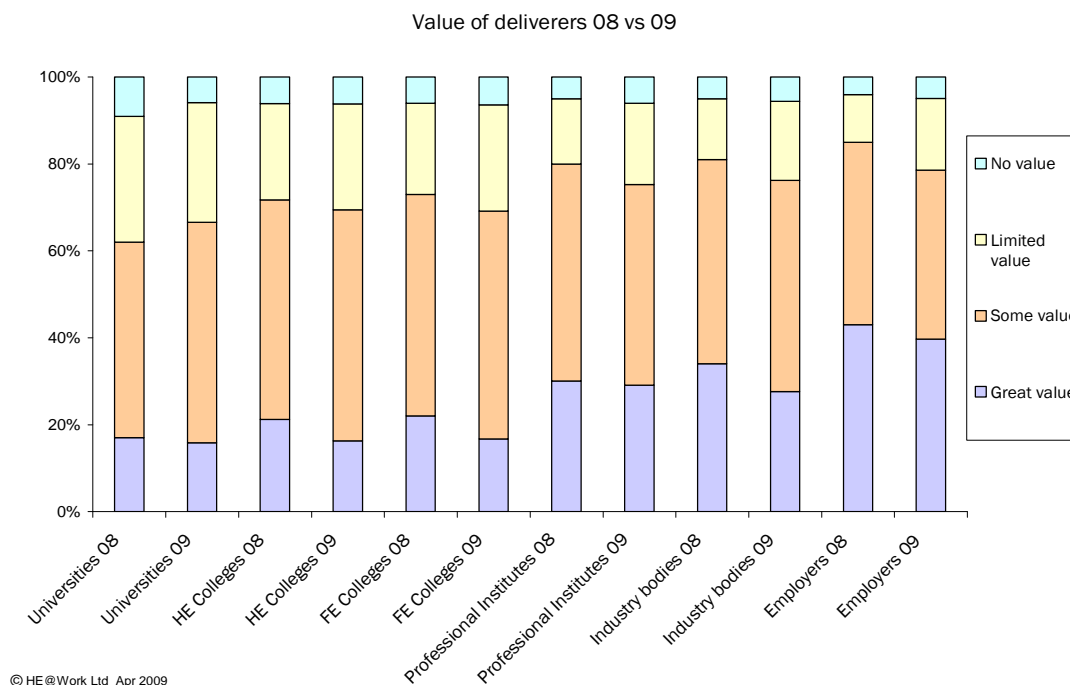


Figure 7

Training Supply and Demand

In 2008 the position was described as;

“The highest response (over 40%) wanted on the job role specific training. Attendance at conferences and seminars, CPD programmes, and accredited short courses also polled more than 20%. External non-accredited courses, and support with longer term external programs such as MBAs and external degrees, represented 10-15% of the sample. Similarly distance learning and web based learning attracted a 10% response.

Looking specifically at courses, the most favoured were short external accredited courses (25%); short accredited in-house courses and medium length residential accredited courses with 20%. Non-accredited courses attracted a lower return, especially the longer non-accredited courses at 10%.

These results were consistent between respondents with different qualification levels and those in different sectors, though retail, media, sport and transport seemed more strongly biased against in-house courses (polling around 10% for accredited in-house courses).” (Dunn, Mumford & Roodhouse, 2008 p121)

Interestingly there has been a change in 2009;

- less utilization of ‘short in-house courses (both accredited and non-accredited)’, ‘paid for employee attendance at conferences and/or seminars’, ‘paid for employee attendance on short courses outside the workplace (both accredited and non-

accredited) and also 'paid for employee attendance on longer accredited residential courses'

- an increased interest in, albeit of only one or two points, 'webcasts, podcasts, webinars and/or online classrooms'
- a decrease, both in the perception of what's offered and also of what's wanted for 'other accredited higher education opportunities delivered in the workplace'.

The last point may be that there is no interest because it's not offered however as there is also a decrease in respondents wanting 'Paid for or contributions towards employee participation in external postgraduate courses (e.g. MBA, Postgraduate Diplomas etc.,)' it could relate to the increase in people feeling they have reached their academic potential and in uncertain times are unwilling to invest more time and money in gaining further training and qualifications. These changes in attitude compared with 2008 may then be caused by the rapid economic decline in the UK.

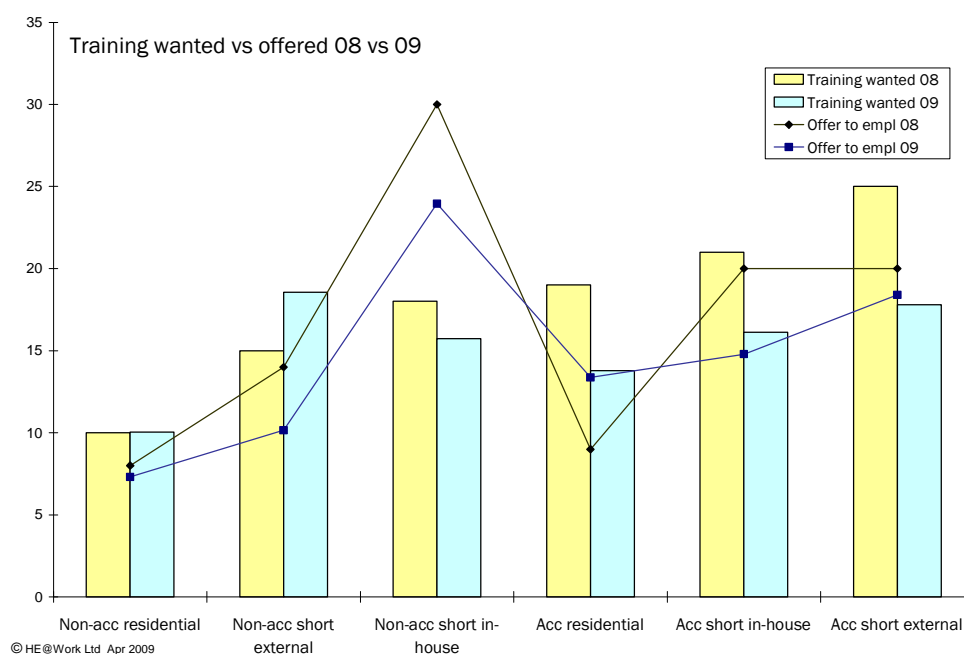


Figure 8

When consideration was given to the type of training that respondents see being offered by employers in general and to themselves in particular mapped in figure 8, there is a general perception that less training is being offered compared to the 2008 survey with just about every area showing a decrease – this is noticeable in the areas of on the job training and coaching where there are decreases of 25 and 12 points respectively.

Motivation

Turning to the motivation of employees the 2009 survey found;

- most people (over 80%) consider training and development important to themselves and their employers, yet there has been a detectable down grading from very important to quite important
- a drop in positive responses about wanting and willingness to invest time in professional development, either at work or at home.
- an increase of 4 points in the willingness to invest financially in professional development
- a decline of 19 points by respondents feeling they would themselves benefit most from gaining a higher-level industry/employer-specific qualification, from nearly half in 2008 to under one-third in 2009

In terms of the impact on the individual of studying for industry/employer-specific accredited qualifications there has been a noticeable downward shift in all responses. In particular, whether 'it would make me more valued by my current employer' has declined by 16 points – although this is still the highest rated response. The second highest ranking response is 'It would offer me greater career opportunities within my current organisation'. It remains the case that the percentage of people who do study as an escape route is, in fact, relatively small even with the changed 2009 economic circumstances. There is a sense of working towards securing the existing job role within the organization.

Conclusion

When considering both surveys, it is clear that there is a continuing trend by employees for training and development regardless of the economic environment. However, it remains the case that this needs to be employer led and focused in the workplace. The question that remains unanswered is concerned with employer attitude, and willingness to commit resources to higher level skills training. This is captured in the Higher Education Consultation Paper Higher Education at Work, High Skills: High Value published by the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) in 2008:

“There is a perception that British employers are reluctant to train their staff, particularly if it involves paying for training where the immediate business benefits are unclear. Many lack the time or desire to get involved with higher education providers to articulate what they want in terms that are meaningful to academia. And some may have views of higher education that are out of date, not understanding what a modern university does, or can offer.”

This reluctance, and partial ignorance, coupled with the cultural and structural complexities of businesses and universities add up to a difficult terrain for beneficial and mutual engagement. DIUS has estimated that in 2005 total annual employer training expenditure in England was £33.3 billion. Much of this covered on-the-job training and the labour costs of those being trained, but we estimate that around £5 billion worth was on training potentially on offer from higher education providers^{vii}. In addition the Department makes a further point: “the income that higher education in fact secures from employers for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) 19 was estimated in 2005–06 to be worth £335 million (or around 6% of this potential revenue pool). The private sector or employer in-house provision accounted for much of the rest. According to the same survey, 13 institutions accounted for half of the CPD revenue into all English higher education institutions. If every institution raised its CPD revenue to the average of these 13 institutions, it would increase the market by well over £1 billion.”

The key questions, given the survey employee attitudes in large businesses, are ; how to access companies successfully; how far universities are prepared to go to meet the needs of business and what role should the State play given the complex and diverse nature of business and higher education.

ⁱ HE@Work is a consultancy formed by a partnership between the Edge Foundation and UVAC
Its aims:

- to increase the recognition of workplace learning as academic learning
- to facilitate the award of workplace learning qualifications at undergraduate and postgraduate levels

Working with: Anglia Ruskin University; University of Cambridge – Division of Professional Studies; University of Chester; University of Derby; Kingston University; Leeds Metropolitan University; Manchester Metropolitan University; Middlesex University; Northumbria University; University of Oxford CPD Department; The University of Winchester. Clients include: GSK, MacDonalds and CIEA

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.personneltoday.com/articles/2009/05/12/50642/training-funds-wasted-on-irrelevant-subjects-to-please.html> Accessed 27th May 2009

^{iv} Emma Pollard Senior Research Fellow Institute for Employment Studies (IES) Report, “University is Not Just for Young People” August 2008 ISBN: 9 781 85184 400 5 IES Working Paper: WP16

^v From Influence to Collaboration: Employer Engagement with Higher Education for Learning and Skills Draft Report for Consultation at CIHE Seminar 8th May 2008, Authors: Helen Connor and Wendy Hirsh

^{vi} Stepping Higher: Workforce development through employer-higher education partnership a joint report by the CBI, Universities UK and HEFCE, published by CBI, October 2008, p20

^{vii} Taken from the *National Employers Skills Survey 2005*, LSC, 2006 and DfES/DIUS own estimate, 2006

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