

## Work Based Learning Futures 4

### Work Based Learning: Policy into Practice?

[Economic and business growth national policy](#)

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#### HE@WORK: THREE YEAR LONGITUDINAL EMPLOYEE LEARNING ATTITUDES SURVEY OF LARGE PRIVATE BUSINESSES, 2008 - 10

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#### Abstract

This paper is intended to bring together three years of surveying large business employer attitude to higher level training and development. HE@Work conducted the same surveys in 2008, 2009 and 2010 of large private sector 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. For the first time these results provide a longitudinal analysis of attitudes in large businesses including the effects of the UK economic recession.

The paper will address questions of the value of learning, qualifications, type of provision, motivation, supply and demand not just in terms of the 2010 results but more importantly what trends have emerged over three years and how these have been influenced by external factors.

From the findings, there is a discussion of the policy implications for university WBL provision and how this relates to national policies in this field.

#### INTRODUCTION

Successive United Kingdom Governments continue to invest heavily in the formal education system to give individuals the chance to realise their potential, for the social and economic good. The roots of this state commitment can be traced back to the initiatives of far sighted employers such as Salt and Owen and their view of the workplace in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Robert Owen the pioneering employer who established the model village at New Lanark for his workers explained in his "New View of Society essays (1813 – 1816):

"Train any population rationally, and they will be rational. Furnish honest and useful employments to those so trained and such employments they will greatly prefer to dishonest or injurious occupations. It is beyond all calculation the interest of every

government to provide that training and that employment; and to provide both is easily practicable".

This stands up to scrutiny today however he puts his finger on the importance of non formal learning derived from many experiences including the workplace. He suggests in his book of the New Moral World 3rd Part, 1842 where this learning comes from pointing out that it is not just traditional talk and chalk but rather in contemporary terms, experiential learning;

"Where are these rational practices to be taught and acquired? Not within the four walls of a bare building, in which formality predominates ..... But in the nursery, playground, fields, gardens, workshops, manufacture museums and class-rooms. ...The facts collected from all these sources will be concentrated, explained, discussed, made obvious to all, and shown in their direct application to practice in all the business of life".

Roodhouse develops this in a paper Revisiting "Technical "Education.

"Sadly, what becomes glaringly obvious from the 1980s onwards is the failure of successive governments to connect meeting employer need with the coherent provision of quality learning and research at all levels including further and higher education. This in part may be due to the artificial public policy split since the 1950s between training and education provision. This is compounded by continuous structural change even though our social and economic imperatives have remained largely consistent throughout this period. We have continued to alter the structures, arranging the deckchairs syndrome, but not addressed the basic fault line, a failure to understand training and education as an integrated 'learning continuum' that takes place in work, at home as well as college or campus. This is perfectly illustrated with the New Labour Government introduction of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA)<sup>i</sup> and the Skills for Business network (all of which are expected to resolve the UK skill and productivity gap) around 2000 onwards replacing the earlier National Training Organisations (NTOs) and National Training Organisation National Council (NTONC) expected to do the same, a 1990s model, which in turn were born out of industry training organisations/industry lead bodies and even earlier industry training boards established in the 1964.<sup>ii</sup> These organisational gymnastics are mirrored with technical colleges becoming polytechnics and polytechnics then emerging as the new universities in 1992. Further education colleges have followed their own path too."

However, today, in the UK, while 42% of 18-30 year olds participate in higher education (HEFCE), we continue to show little interest for others, particularly those in work. There is a general assumption that all they need is practical instruction in how to do their job. It is as if the education system has written them off not least the university system because it is course driven and biased in favour of the full time student. This, however, is not a deliberate policy but rather an unintended consequence of the concern to maintain global competitiveness and hence wealth creation by increasing the number of graduates available year on year to the UK labour market, giving more people the opportunity to enter the market place at degree level.

Finally, the surveys were carried in different economic environments with 2008 being stable, followed by the commencement of a recession including the credit crunch in the year 2009 with the end of the recession in the latter stages of 2010. So the results provide important information about the effect of the recession on employee attitude to learning.

Consequently the purpose of this paper is to explore how those in full time employment particularly in large businesses can access and benefit from university level education whilst continuing within employment.

## **RATIONALE**

There is no doubt that the established further and higher education system has been highly successful in developing and delivering entry to work programmes for many years; that is, qualifying people for work at higher levels.

Similarly, business continues to provide targeted training for its employees as it has always done. The Leitch Report (2006 p12) confirmed this;

“Employers, individuals and the Government all invest significantly in skills improvements. In England, employers spend around £2.4 billion on direct course costs and up to £17.4 billion in total, excluding the wages of employees.”

This learning is focussed on a job and may be associated with training to gain the skills, experiential learning from doing a job, or reflection about the context of that job. Importantly, the work role automatically creates a social setting and competency framework. Performance assessment in the role is intuitively conducted by work peers and line managers, in a way that is both continuous and involuntary. In this world of employment there is an ongoing need to make a contribution in a work team that is valued by others and this need is central to the learning that takes place. Structured support for learning in the workplace therefore focuses on interventions that allow the individual to see how what they are doing ‘fits’ with the activities of others; in other words, culture building.

Nevertheless, the F/HE sector continues to engage in giving graduates the relative chances of acquiring and maintaining different kinds of employment. However, continuous professional development, retraining, part-time provision, learning diagnostics, assessment and certification, all work based, remain marginal in university provision. Why is this the case, when the national economic and social demands are as strident as ever? Part of the story is a general lack, at a local university level, of an overall institutional work-based learning strategy and as Connor from the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) says; there is a lack of relative importance attached to this type of activity, including making links with business compared with developing academic research and international standing. This could be attributed to public sector funding priorities which, until recently, have not encouraged higher education engagement in workforce development.

In this respect, it is noticeable that national work-based learning government initiatives, such as apprenticeships, have failed to become integral components of further and higher education progression routes. A lack of employer awareness of Higher Education (HE), and the perception that HE is out of touch, impractical, and unresponsive to employer needs, continues to act as a barrier to HE engagement with employers.

However considerable effort has been made to develop work-based learning, particularly by institutions such as Middlesex, Anglia Ruskin, Portsmouth, Derby, Glamorgan and Northumbria universities. It has been achieved through the individual and organisational desire to respond to local and regional needs. This is despite the paucity of coincident policy directives from

agencies with responsibility for business, skills, education and learning. Whatever the national policy drive, mechanisms to connect business needs with higher education provision are generally disorganised and confusing.

What does this mean for the individual, employer and university? There is a developing interest by employees, employers and universities in the workplace learning. Those in work are increasingly undertaking work based learning qualifications because they are:

- able to see direct relevance between studying for a qualification to workbased learning and their role in the workplace
- can obtain support from their employers
- are able to develop the programme around their own professional development needs and individual interests
- are able to negotiate the focus, context, timescale and assessment of their work
- can fit this flexible form of study into their working and personal lives
- view studying for an accredited qualification as evidence of commitment to their professional role
- seek career progression and the potential for increased earnings

Durrant, Rhodes and Young develop this further by summarizing the value of workbased learning and accreditation to the employer:

- “staff undertake real work projects which offer direct benefit to their organisation
- the workforce becomes motivated and focused on organisational challenges
- staff on the workbased learning programmes become more closely engaged in organisational processes
- increased loyalty results from the visible and tangible investment in the development of the workforce
- staff retention rates are improved and enhanced capabilities of existing workforce can help with recruitment -- both as a means of attracting new employees, but also as a means of promoting from within the organisation
- studying on a workbased learning programme to help employees to achieve their full potential
- they can work with the University to develop a programme which not only supports the professional development of their staff which also focuses on organisational improvement
- organisational and cultural change can be effected through small-scale developments via work based learning projects
- workbased learning can be a means of addressing and meeting an organisation’s business plans”

It is equally important in this tripartite arrangement to recognise that: universities have a stake in workforce development; the labour market and employer demand hence workbased learning. However, there is no common language as yet between universities and employers; and there are national structural faults in the system for example splitting further and higher education and allowing different structural arrangements for training and higher education. Consequently it is

no surprise that workbased learning as ‘the new kid on the curriculum and qualification block’ in higher education is less well developed than perhaps it should be.

## **METHODOLOGY**

HE@Work<sup>iii</sup> commissioned employee surveys in 2008, 2009, and 2010 as part of its work programme to provide annual data used to inform planning and identify trends. 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.

OnePoll, a commercial market research company were chosen in 2008, 2009 and 2010 to undertake the annual survey over a 5 week period (January/February) of employees in the United Kingdom, working for private businesses which typically employ over 2000 people in a variety of industrial sectors.

The instrument was a self completed web-based questionnaire with a common core of questions to all three surveys. 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.

The same survey dataset of 50,000 members of the polling network and definition of large business has been used throughout. It was again a self completing questionnaire as previously and the number of respondents almost identical, with 4728 in 2008, 4514 in the 2009 and ----- in the 2010 survey.

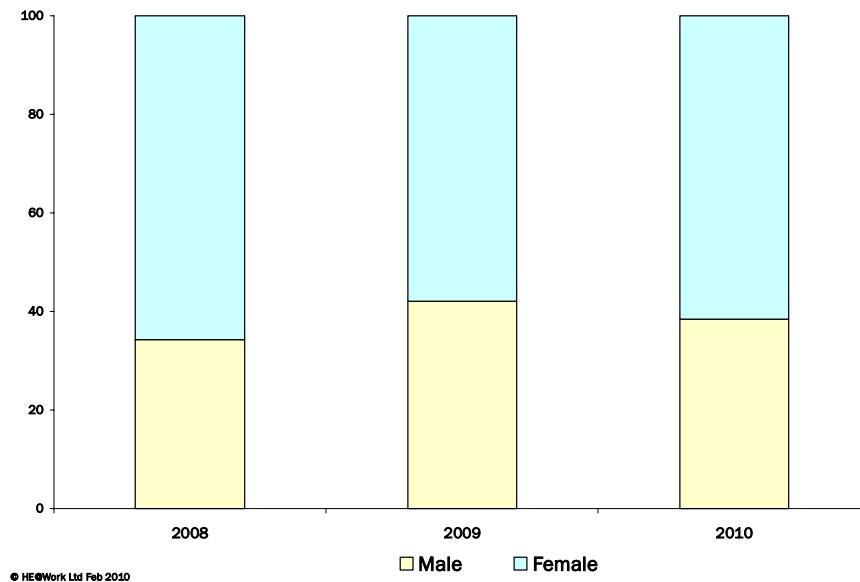
As the surveys used a self-completing questionnaire, the results are considered indicative since the absolute levels of response may not be statistically valid. The analysis therefore focuses on the ranking of responses rather than absolute levels. In addition the surveys do not identify individual companies but did include regional location. Therefore it is more of an annual opinion poll and snapshot in time. However with three annual surveys completed using the identical methodology and instrument, it is possible to detect trends.

What follows are the key findings of the 2010 survey compared with 2008 and 2009.

## **RESPONDENT PROFILE**

The gender split found in **figure 1** confirms the dominance of women respondents over the three years with a slight increase in 2010 compared with 2009.

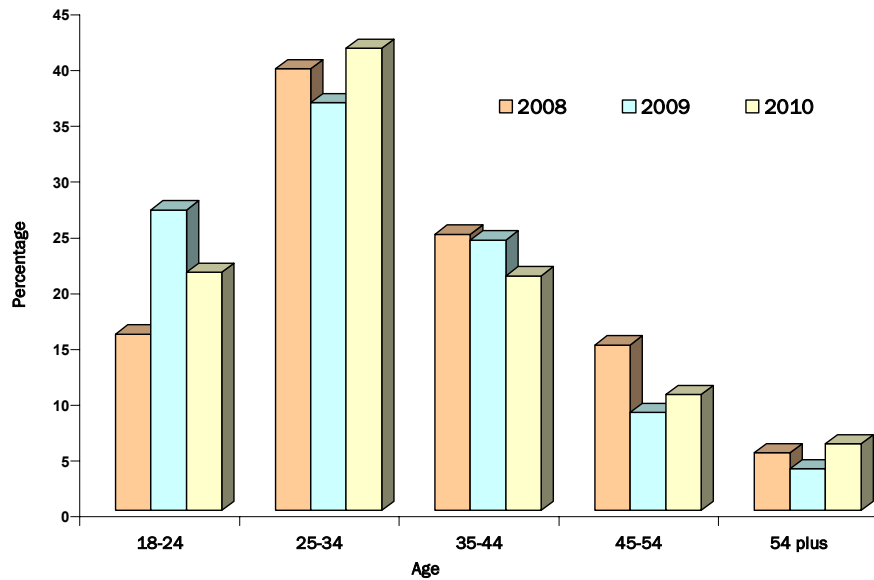
**Figure 1: Gender**



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**. When compared with the 2010 survey, there is a noticeable increase in the 25-34 age range exceeding the 2008 results. There is also a marginal increase in the 54+age range over previous years. Nevertheless the dominant group over the three years is the 25 – 34 age range, not one that receives much public policy attention with the exception of Leitch:

“More than 70 per cent of the 2020 working age population are already over the age of 16. As the global economy changes and working lives lengthen with population ageing, adults will increasingly need to update their skills in the workforce. There is a pressing need to raise the rates of skills improvements among adults – the UK cannot reach a world class ambition by 2020 without this.” (Leitch Report, 2006, p13)

**Figure 2: Age Profile**



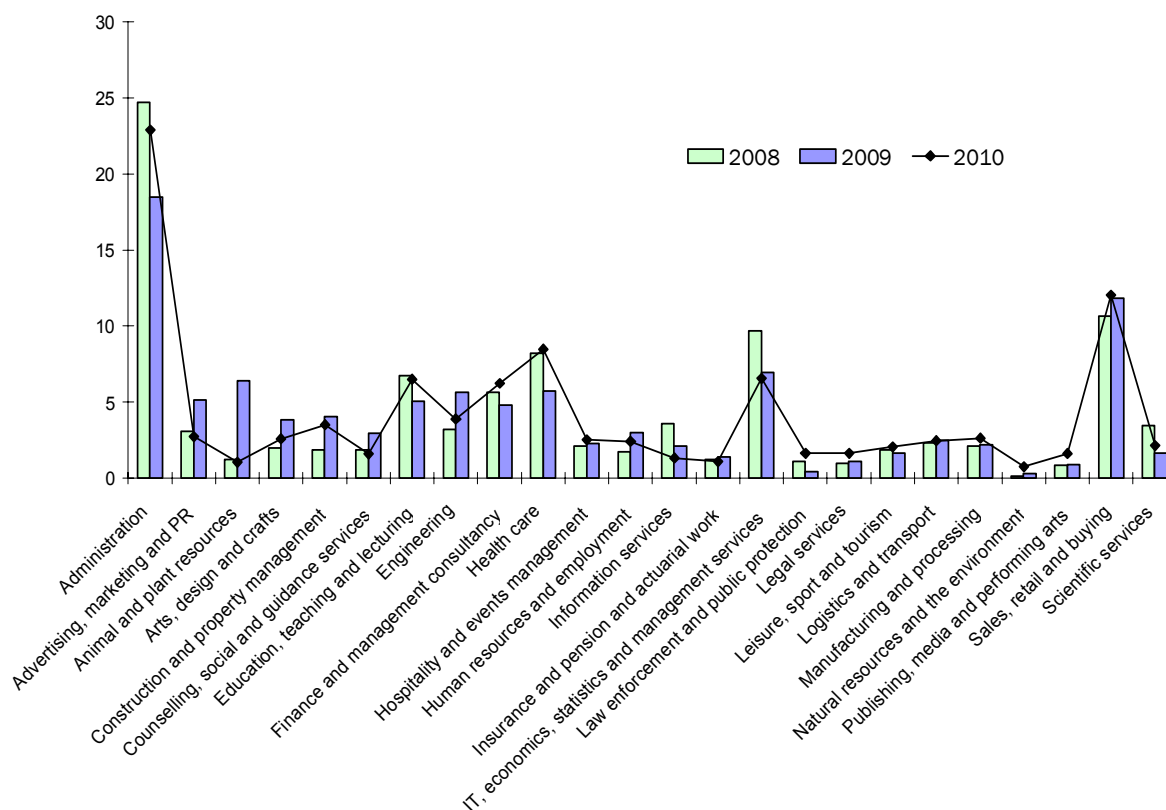
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Respondent job roles, **figure 3** were considered in all surveys to provide an insight into the spectrum of jobs covered and the balance. It is clear in the surveys that those working in administration dominate followed by sales, retail, and buying then health care and education, teaching and lecturing. IT, economics, statistics, and management services are also a significant grouping. 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. This provides a respondent spread comparable to the UK economy with service industry dominance and is remarkably consistent across the three years.

The majority of respondents in all years are White British although this dropped slightly from just over 80% in 2008 and 2010 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.

Consequently the respondent profile over the three years of surveys is largely female, aged 25 to 34 yrs working as an administrator or in sales/retailing and is of White British origin.

**Figure 3: Job Roles**



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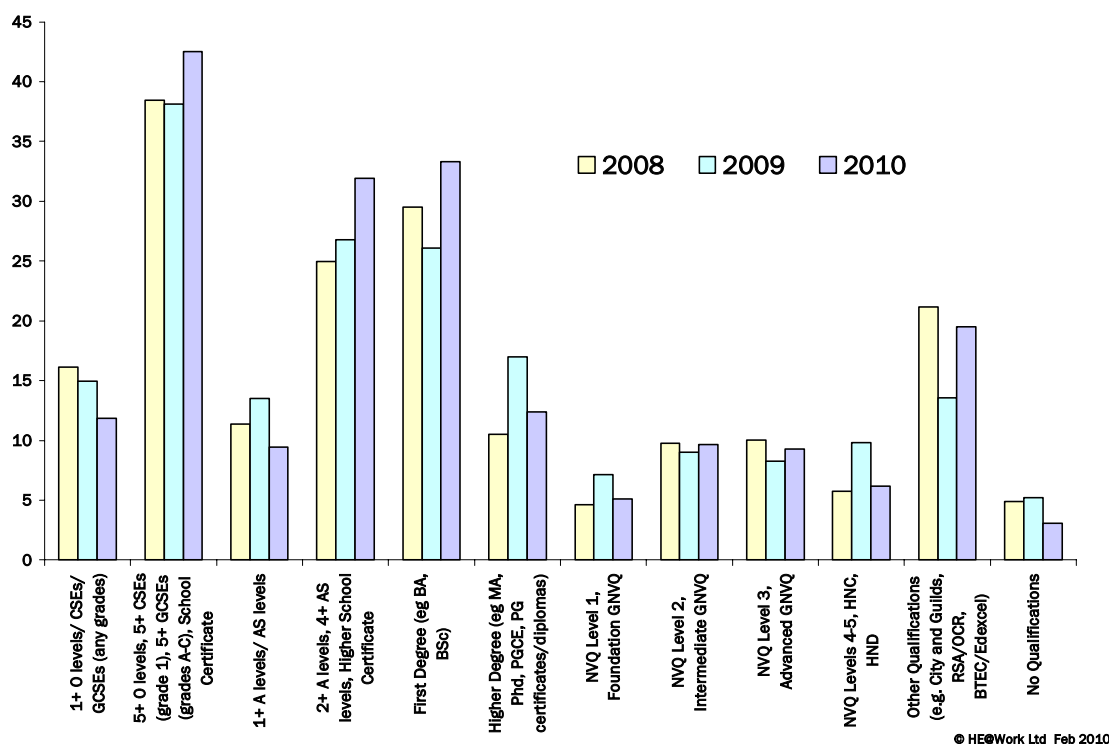
Data on the level of qualifications achieved by respondents, **figure 4** was also collected in 2008, 2009 and 2010. However the data is difficult to verify because respondents were asked to tick all the levels of qualifications they had achieved, and there are indicators that this may not have been 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%. The 2010 results presented a slightly different picture with noticeable increases in level 2 and 3 qualifications. However there is also a significant increase in respondents holding a first degree with a rather surprising reduction in those with a higher degree.

There is overall evidence to suggest that the respondents are generally qualified at levels 2 and 3 that is school qualification, with an average of 30% holding a first degree and 13% a higher degree. It also suggests that the NVQ type of qualification has not increased in popularity and those reporting no qualifications remains consistently low at 4% of respondents. This points to a well educated group of respondents which has yet to take advantage of higher level awards.

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 the second highest region was the East Midlands with 14% of respondents, an increase of 5% over 2008. The 2010 results follow a similar pattern, with London and South East providing the location for 36% of respondents, followed by the North West with 13% and the South West with 11%.

It is possible to summarize the typical respondent as, female, aged 25 to 34 yrs with good school qualifications and a first degree working as an administrator or sales/retailing in the South East and is of White British origin.

**Figure 4: Qualifications Held by Respondents**



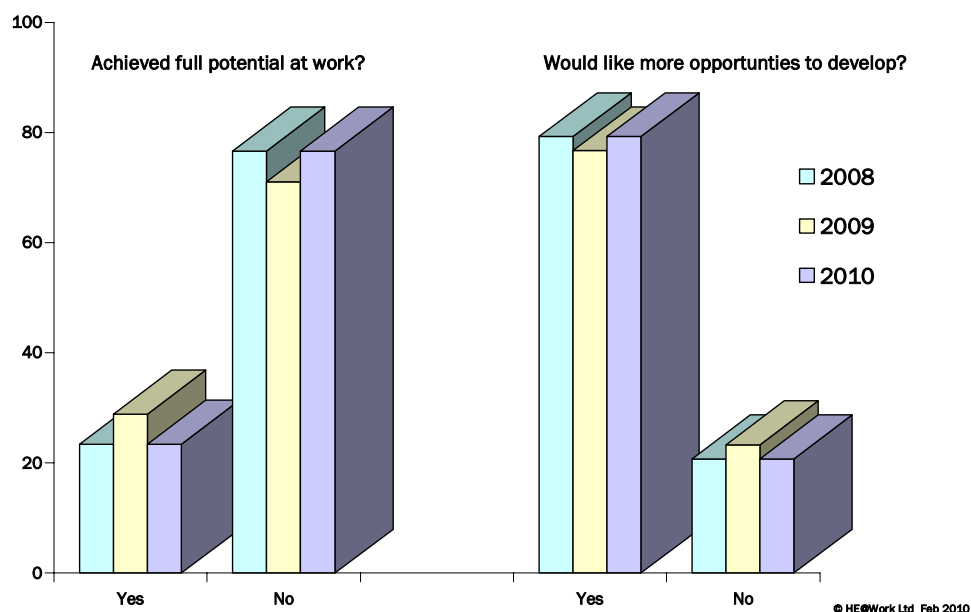
## THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING

Over the three years, respondents have overwhelmingly confirmed that they did not achieve their potential (69%) in the formal education system and wanted to achieve more (72%). This is despite the recession and consequently is significant, that is respondents are concerned to achieve more at work regardless of the economic climate

Asked whether they had achieved their learning potential at work almost 75% of the 2008 respondents said no, however when asked whether they wanted opportunities to develop professionally more than 80% said yes. (Roodhouse, 2009, p35) 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). What is remarkable in these results is the consistency of response, in 2009 and 2010 as illustrated in **figure 5**. With a slight decline in 2009, the results are almost identical. It is apparent there is a tangible need for personal learning development in work and this trend suggests a market.

**Figure 5: Potential for Learning at Work**



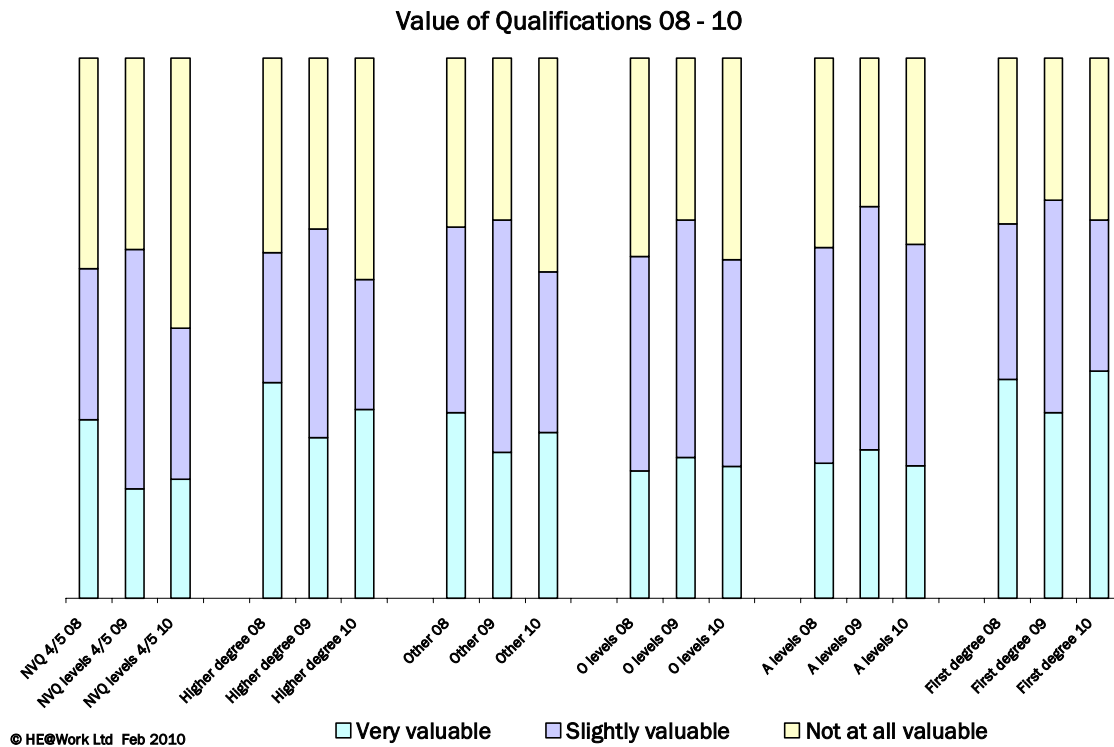
## QUALIFICATIONS AND PROVIDERS

The perceived value of qualifications in **figure 6** by respondents, across all three years, confirms a trend for valuing degrees and higher degrees in preference to vocationally oriented qualifications such as NVQs. Although 2009 saw a slight dip in interest for university type qualifications overall the interest remains firm (Roodhouse, 2009, p37). To some extent, this is not surprising when considering the results illustrated in **figure 4**, Qualifications held by respondents where there is evidence of a significant number of respondents (30% all years) holding first degrees and (13% all years) with higher degrees.

Although O levels and A levels have been achieved by around 40% of respondents in all three years they are considered to be of limited value, probably because for employees these are a staging post in educational attainment.

This seems to confirm that a degree continues to be the “gold standard” for respondents in large businesses, although it is difficult from these results to identify the status of professional qualifications. It also may be worth noting that large businesses are employers of graduates.

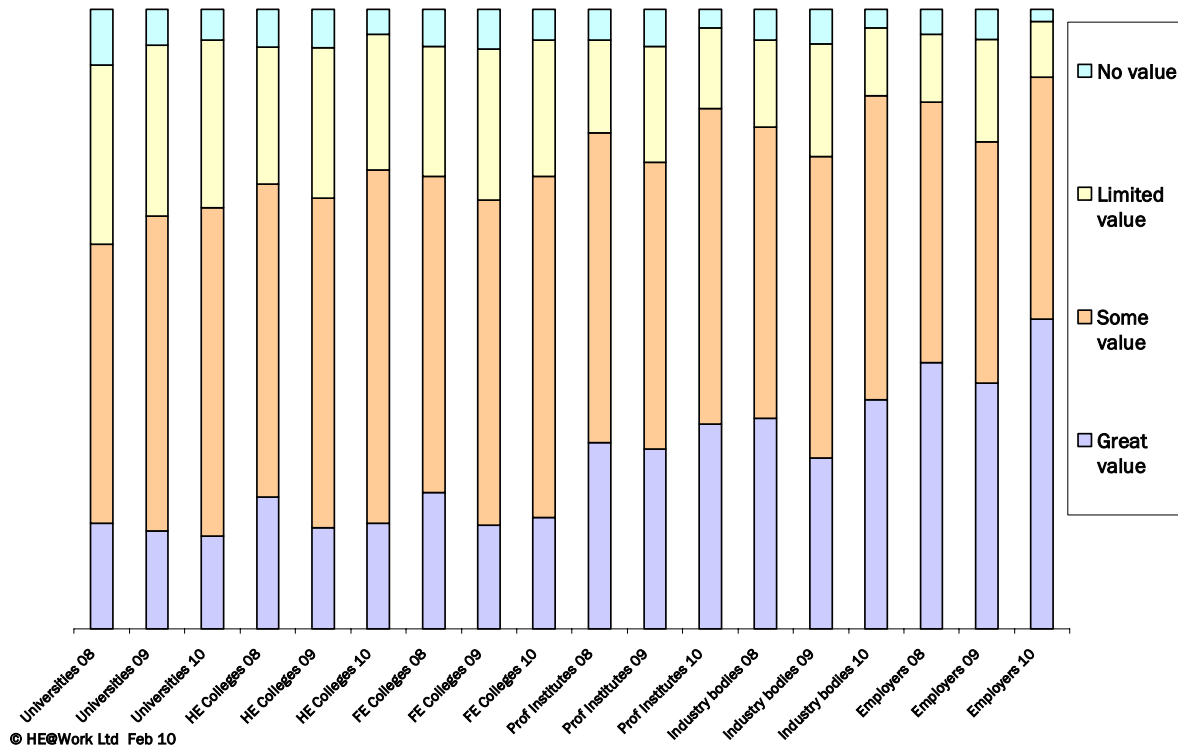
**Figure 6: The Value to Respondents of Qualifications**



Although there are slight variations in results, clear evidence exists that the formal education system, that is universities, higher education colleges, and further education colleges has substantially less value to respondents than their employer, professional body, and industry organisation learning provision. There is something of a dichotomy here, given earlier findings which indicate the significant value given to degrees from universities and HE colleges. Nevertheless the employer remains the most valued deliverer of learning. This confirms the importance of the workplace as a location for learning and highlights how far the formal education system has yet to go to be recognised by employees as a natural provider of workplace learning. This might be one of the root causes of failure to deliver the Leitch targets. Mike Campbell, an advisor to Leitch and Director of UKCES, said: "Skills is acting as something of a drag on the UK's performance. Yes, we've made a lot of progress, but we still rank 12th in high level skills and 17th in low level skills. That's somewhat short of where we need to be. The UK is not catching on." (Peacock, 2009)

**Figure 7: The Value of Learning Deliverers to Respondents**

Value of deliverers 08 - 10

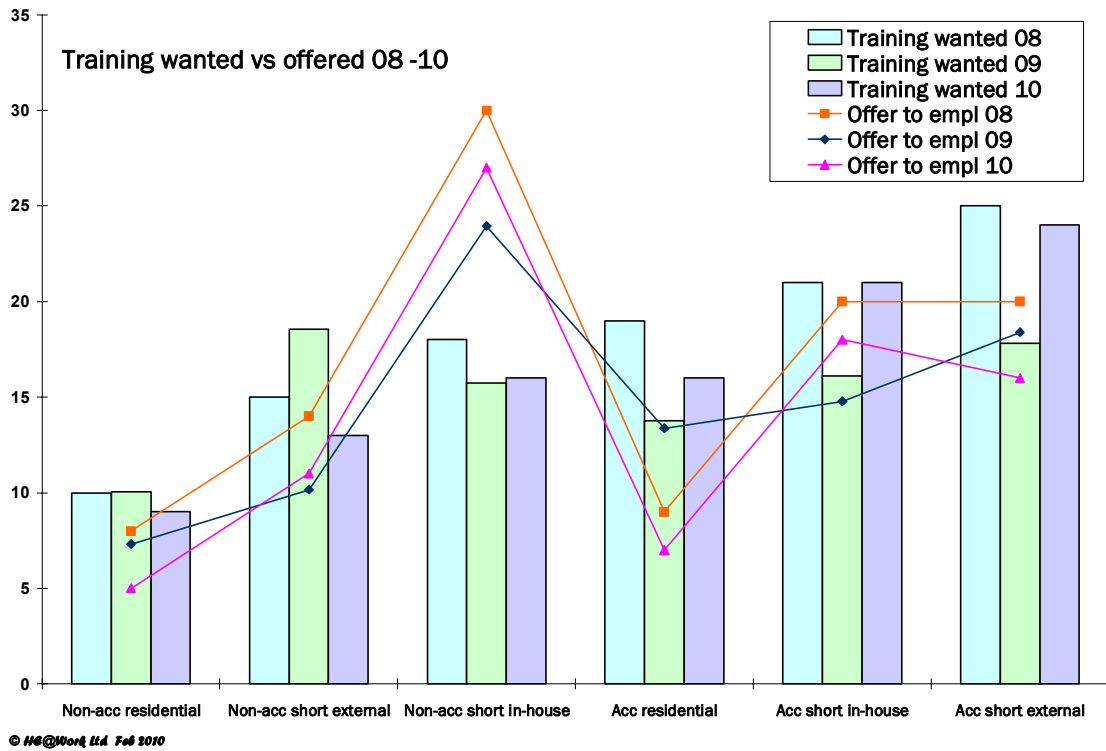


## TRAINING SUPPLY AND DEMAND

There is a clear trend in **figure 8** which exposes the difference between what training respondents want, compared with what is offered to them by employers. Non-accredited short course in-house training is the preferred model of the employer whereas employees indicate their preference for short course accredited in-house training. The workplace is asserted again as the location for learning, by both the employer and employee, however, external accreditation is clearly the missing link and one the formal education system can provide, particularly universities which have the capacity to accredit organisations to deliver their awards.

Off the job learning, such as day release and residentials clearly have their place in the provision, but remain less popular than the in-house options. Given that most provision in universities and further education colleges is course based with physical presence on the university campus or college premises over long periods of time it is unlikely universities will meet this need in the short term with the exception of a small number which have developed work based learning solutions.

**Figure 8: The Training wanted by respondents and what was provided**

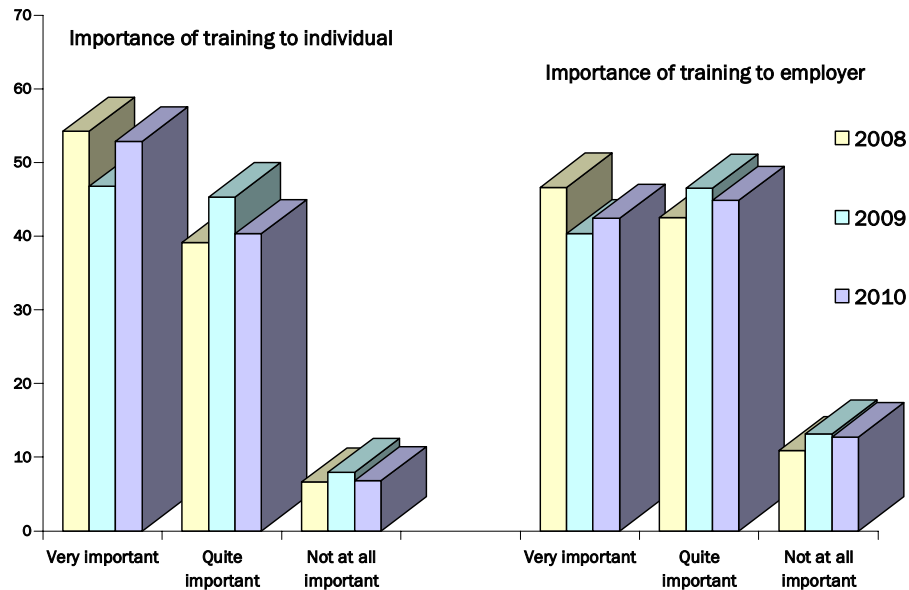


## MOTIVATION

When considering all years of the survey it is apparent that training is important to respondents, over 55%, and under 10% with no interest at all. Whereas employers are slightly less

enthusiastic but nevertheless committed, however, there are around 15% of employers who do not consider training important at all. This is an important trend when environmental factors such as the economic recession are taken into account. So employees see the value of learning regardless of externalised factors.

**Figure 9: The Importance of Training to the Employer and Employee**

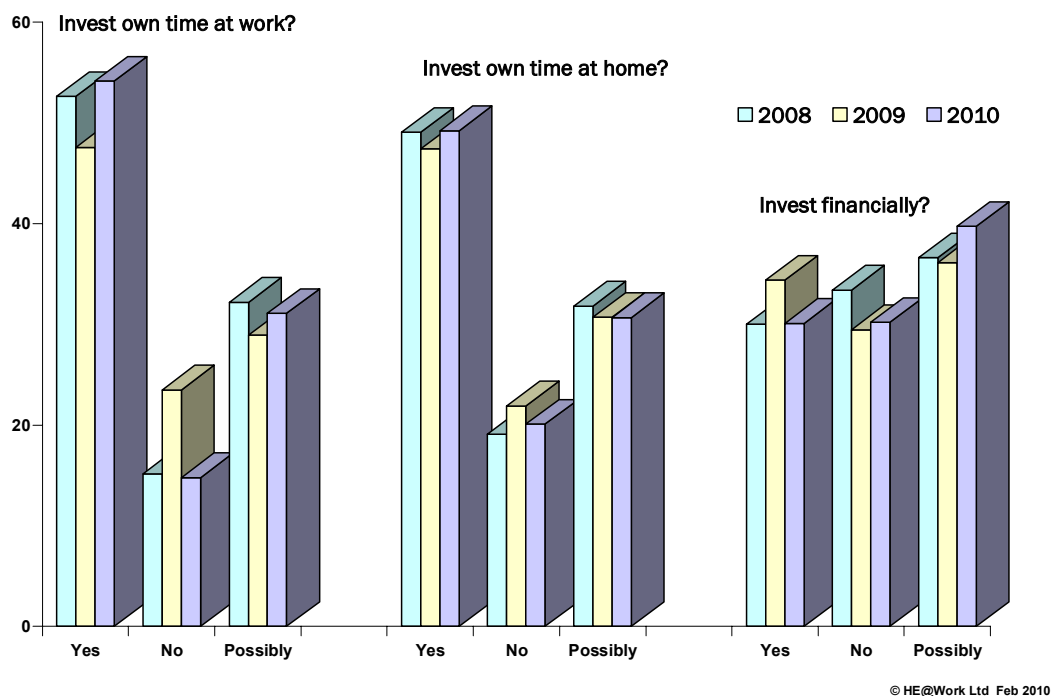


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Following on from this, there has been an increase in 2010 over previous years with regard to respondent willingness to commit their time at work to learning and noticeably possibly contribute financially (see **figure 10**). Overall, the trend seems to confirm that respondents are willing to contribute their time at work, **figure 9**, home to a lesser extent and furthermore consider contributing the costs involved. This points to a possible recognition that those working in large businesses are motivated to train primarily in the workplace and see the value of it in “good and bad times”. As a consequence there is confirmed demand which is in part being met by the employer offer described **figure 8** but by no means entirely. There is a place for accredited short workplace courses.

**Figure 10** provides the trend evidence to support the motivation findings by describing the impact of training undertaken by respondents, in particular feeling valued by their employer and performing better in the current role. From a work based learning point of view this confirms the importance of workplace delivery of learning relevant and derived from the job, so for example, company competence frameworks become important learning frameworks.

**Figure 10: The willingness of Respondents to invest in Learning**

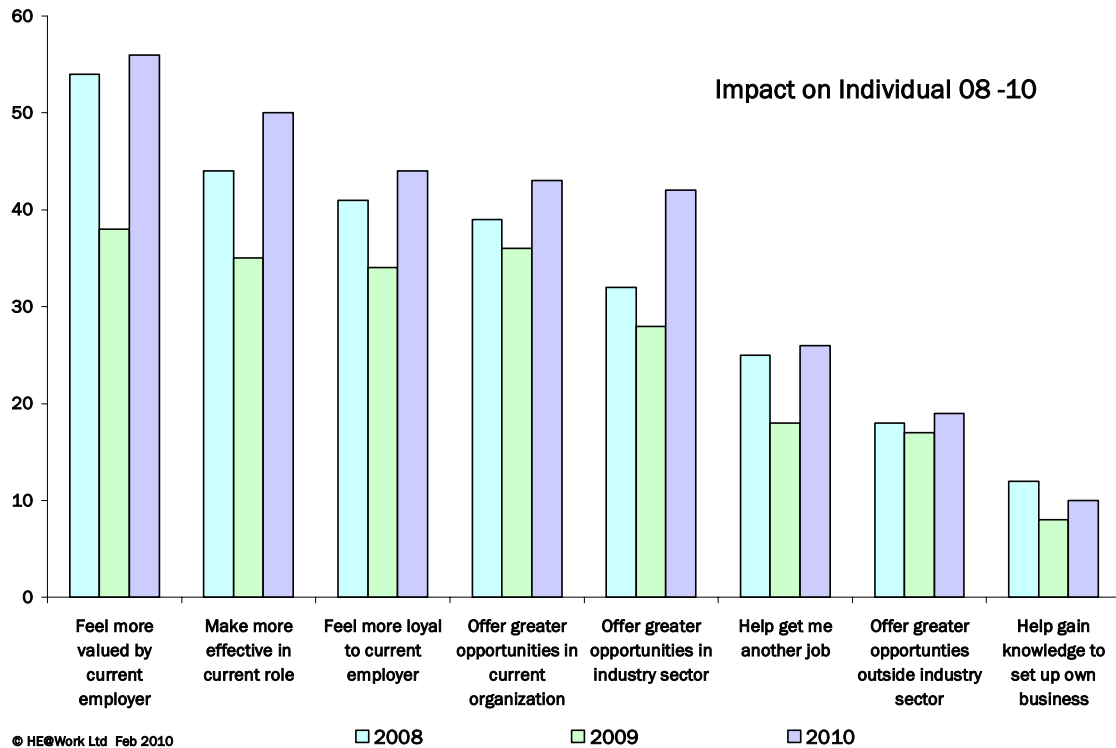


## IMPLICATIONS

Traditionally government policy has been focussed on providing education up to the point of entry to work. It was assumed that employers would take over and provide continuing professional development to the extent it was needed. In some sectors professional bodies assumed a very strong role in relation to continuing professional development; indeed in a few sectors professional body qualifications are the 'gold standard' for those in work. However post the Leitch Report (2006), government policy has included the education of people in employment as government policy. The widening participation agenda sought to raise the standards of education for those in work by stimulating the engagement of higher education and further education institutions in workbased learning. The question is 'when we look at the attitudes of those in work do we see any evidence that this is working?'

The implication of this survey is that it is not working. Employees continue to see employers and professional bodies as much more credible delivers of workbased learning than higher or further education institutions and the gap is progressively widening (**figure 7**).

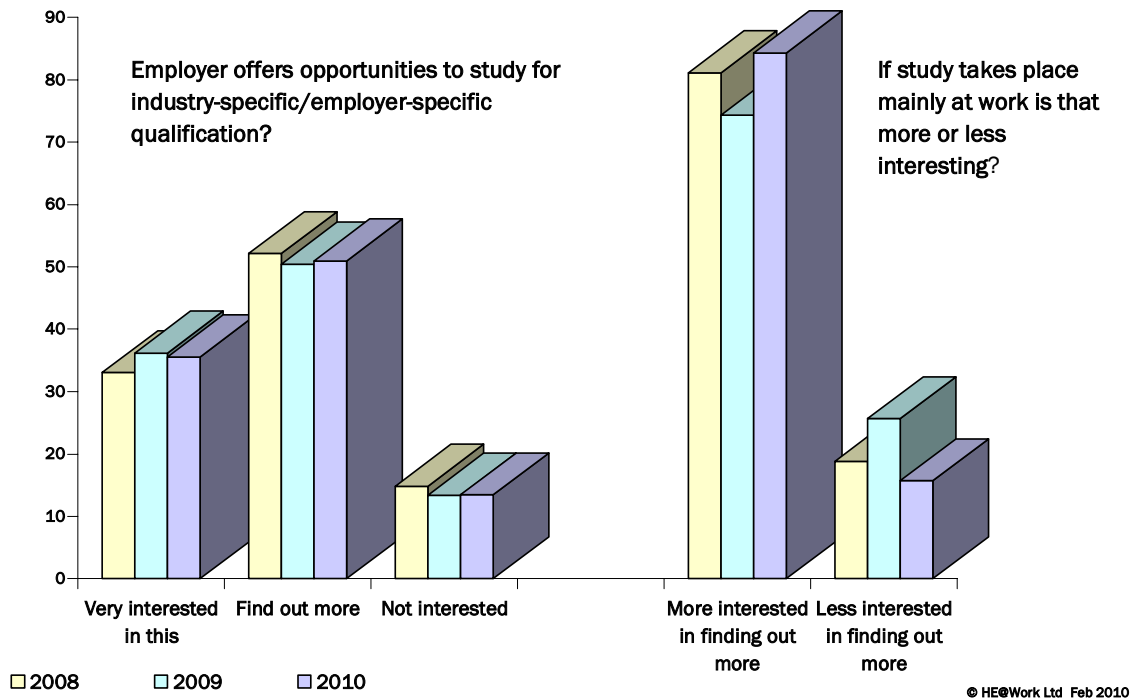
**Figure 11: The impact of learning on the individual respondent**



This might be because in the current economic climate those in work are focussing on keeping their jobs and skills development has taken a backseat (**See figure 11**). There was indeed a small dip in the desire for development at the start of 2009 but this has fully recovered (**figure 5**). Similarly there was a dip in the perceived value of first degrees but again this has recovered (**figure 6**). Indeed the first degree seems to have survived as the gold standard for those in work despite the extensive press comment about university leavers failing to get jobs. It is also possible that the decline in credibility of educational institutions is an aberration of sample characteristics but the characteristics of the sample appear to be very consistent and other aspects of attitude have remained stable.

It is also possible that the decline in credibility of educational institutions is linked to an increase in employer provision. However **figure 8** would not support that premise. Somewhat paradoxically **figure 8** shows a general decline in the provision of training and an unsatisfied desire for more accredited training. The increase in the credibility of employers seems to have occurred despite a decline in the perceived provision by employers. There seems to be an unsatisfied demand for more accredited short external courses. The implication for educational institutions is that there is an open door that they are failing to walk through.

**Figure 12: Learning opportunity preferences**



There is also unequivocal confirmation in **figure 12** of the importance of the workplace as the location for learning by respondents. This is consistent over three years, and confirms other findings such as the requirement for in-house short accredited courses in **figure 8**. The overarching implication from the survey is that a renewed focus on workbased learning in the workplace is likely to pay dividends.

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<sup>i</sup> The SSDA strategy suggests a greater interest in up-skilling the existing workforce, rather than entry provision as the vast majority of those who will be in the workforce in 10 or 15 yrs time are in work now.

<sup>ii</sup> National Skills Task Force concluded in its final report, 2000, 'The work over the last two years to rationalise the number of NTOs and raise their capacity has been very welcome, but we do not believe it has gone far enough. There are still in our view too many NTOs leading to confusion for employers and to organisations that are in some cases still too small to undertake the full range of responsibilities we believe is necessary". There is also a useful paper on the origins of the NTOs, Time to Overhaul the National Training Organisations, Martin Jones, Working Brief 120, December 2000.[http://www.cesi.org.uk/\\_newsite2002/publications](http://www.cesi.org.uk/_newsite2002/publications)

<sup>iii</sup> Higher Education @ Work was borne out of this history and in particular the need to connect higher education with business as an advisory service staffed by people with extensive business experience and an in-depth understanding of the higher education sector. The organisation is a not-for-profit company formed by a partnership between the Edge Foundation and the University Vocational Awards Council, UVAC, and works in collaboration with small group of universities who understand work based learning. 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.

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