



A response from the Association for Learning Technology (ALT) to the DIUS consultation on Higher Education at Work – High Skills: High Value

This response, with the URL http://www.alt.ac.uk/docs/dius_he_at_work_1oct08.pdf, is organised under the 12 questions of the consultation. There is a brief overview of ALT at the end of the response. For further information about ALT, go to <http://www.alt.ac.uk/>.

1. What incentives would encourage employers to be more involved in providing careers information, advice and guidance both before, and during university?

If there was a clear mechanism for doing this, possibly via the new Adult Advice and Careers service, if their graduate recruitment programme costs were reduced, and if their involvement resulted in better and more targeted applicants for jobs, then this ought to be incentive enough.

2a. Given that subject choice at 14 and GCSE and A level attainment are critical factors, is there a case for specific incentives to prospective students to take Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects?

Yes, for example:

1. Encourage and describe the benefits and context of using a combined studies approach viz.: Music Technology and ICT; English Language and Technology; Psychology and Maths.
2. Consider removing Algebra from GCSE Maths and offer Applied (business) Maths at GCSE.
3. Organise a national campaign that promotes and recognises high performing STEM graduates in positions of power and influence within government and industry.

2b. How could any incentives avoid simply reinforcing the decisions of people who would have chosen STEM subjects anyway?

1. Accept that reinforcement is an unavoidable and relatively minor consideration. (Targeting of 'intention' is impossible, and provision of incentives to all – as for teachers in shortage subjects – may simply be the only way.)
2. Support experimentation with subjects by allowing/encouraging students to drop a GCSE in the way then can drop an AS level.
3. Provide incentives to students doing a mix of subjects across the 'STEM/Humanities' divide.

2c. More generally, is there a case for providing incentives to universities or employers to encourage more young people to study STEM and pursue careers in it?

1. 'Conversion course' approaches prior to university, for example in college, whilst useful, would not generate large numbers.
2. There is also a case for supporting Universities to provide more STEM courses. In addition, if it was well publicised, close liaison between employers and universities to highlight job opportunities would encourage students to choose STEM.

3. What support and incentives would help universities offer access to the workplace for all their students?

1. Provision of structured access to the workplace as a component of HE study is complex and costly to organise, and the wide variation in the 'on the ground' situation between different HEIs makes a generalised answer to his question hazardous. In addition, most undergraduates take paid employment during their studies, and so do have 'access to the workplace' whilst studying.
2. One option would be to encourage employers of graduate labour to provide more part-time employment opportunities for students so that undergraduate paid employment is more relevant to students' future employment than the 'bar work' that is typically undertaken at present.

4. How can we help employers better articulate their needs for broad based employability skills?

We need a move a way from simplistic broad-brush commentary from employers of the form 'these days standards are falling and graduates do not have the skills we need', to a structured delineation of the problem, with a particular focus on what are the deciding factors in recruitment decisions, and on which kinds of skills, knowledge, and experience (including 'soft' skills) are decisive when all else is level. DIUS could commission such a delineation.

5. What more can we do to provide more graduates with the language skills and cultural awareness to thrive in a global marketplace?

1. Unstructured gap years are much less useful in the longer term to students than are foreign placements and cultural exchanges; and there may be a case for DIUS to kick start the establishment of a system to promote the latter.
2. There would be value in encouraging school pupils who are not concentrating on languages at AS/A2 to take a globally relevant language at AS/A2 alongside their main subjects, and it might be worth providing incentives for this in parallel with any system of incentives for students taking STEM subjects.

3. The UK is culturally diverse and it ought to be possible to exploit this directly, rather than seeing cultural awareness as something that can only be obtained outside the UK.
4. Finally degree courses that combine a language with STEM and/or which offer (a) period(s) of study abroad should be encouraged.

6a. What further incentives are needed to stimulate and meet employer demand for high level skills?

1. Encourage workplace learning and the recognition and reward of existing skills in a scheme similar to the learndirect 'Learning through Work' programme (<http://www.learningthroughwork.org/>). This is an excellent example of a current intervention that is capable of being substantially expanded, that fits the needs of employers and the needs of employees in the very large cohort that will be the hardest to up-skill in the next 10 years.
2. Do not rule out setting up new providers – notwithstanding the failure of Ufi/learndirect shows what can be achieved if the underlying design and planning are right.

6b. How can we best build on the contributions of further education colleges and providers and their links (in particular) to networks of small and medium sized enterprises?

1. By continuing to encourage collaborative partnerships between FE and HE, and by increasing the proportion of degree-level provision provided by FE.
2. Use of internet collaboration and dissemination channels that already have high levels of SME participation should be exploited.

6c. How well does the framework for high level skills support employer engagement?

No comment

7a. How can we best work with businesses and employers, Trade Unions and employees to encourage demand for high level skills?

1. Choose a different term than 'high level skills', which has little resonance with employers or employees.
2. Strengthen partnerships and collaboration, taking particular account, with the TUC, of the role and reach of workplace union learning representatives.
3. Encourage the provision of a modular curriculum that recognises existing skills and is capable of being embedded within existing business projects and activities. For example formal methodologies such as PRINCE 2 could

be blended into the university curriculum so that undergraduates gain a PRINCE 2 qualification. Similarly employees gaining a PRINCE 2 qualification could have this recognised as contributing to gaining a degree.

4. Ensure that degree-level progression options (and the increased earnings potential that a degree will bring) are properly disseminated to apprentices.
5. The 'advancement agency' for unskilled workers has a key part to play here in capturing and promoting requirements, and there would be a place for national TV advertising.

7b. How can we encourage rapid implementation of an effective framework for credit accumulation and transfer?

1. Keep it simple and easy to manage (which is a challenge, given the diversity of courses and providers). One option might be start work among groups of providers e.g. Russell, GuildHE, and there would be mileage in investigating the extent to which the OU can be more of a catalyst.
2. Ensure that the mechanisms are owned by the individual not the employer or institution, and provide an Internet-based mechanism for learners, employers, and providers to review and manage accumulation.
3. Learn more from US practice.

8. Do we have the right incentives to encourage higher education providers to be more responsive to business and employer demand?

No, incentives should include:

1. A better policy framework, better publicly available well-evidenced market research, and a limited-time incentive scheme which could be based on 'Academic Transformation' ideas from the US, alongside encouraging employer representatives to sit on validation panels.
2. Critically there needs to be a stronger focus on delivering the skills that employers will need 3–5 years into the future, informed by close dialogue between sector skills councils, employers and universities. We should take care to balance these rather narrow 'skills for the immediate future' with a continuing requirement for the scholarship and innovation that fuels economic development in the longer term.
3. Providers should be encouraged to ensure better structured induction and transfer into industry (and vice versa), a mix of time-scales (based not just on the traditional academic year) and the option of a more blended approach for mature learners allowing them to continue to earn whilst studying at HE level.

9. What should be the key features of a model for regional and sectoral bodies to play a much greater role in solving local skills problems and linking higher education institutions and businesses?

1. A strong policy focus from Government on progression, advice and support to less skilled individuals, and on encouraging employers that higher skills are something worth investing in would increase interaction between businesses and institutions.
2. It is not necessarily the case these issues are best dealt with regionally, partly because regional boundaries do not respect labour market variations, and partly because so many employers work supra- or cross-regionally.
3. Sectoral bodies like Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) definitely have a role to play, and the just completed consultation by eSkills on its long term strategy is a good example of a SSC taking seriously the issues raised in this consultation.

10. How can we encourage Regional Development Agencies and Sector Skills Councils to work together to solve local and sectoral skills needs?

By identifying the best examples of current practice and seeking to generalise these. A case in point would be the work undertaken over the last 5 years on ICT skills development under the auspices of Yorkshire Forward, which brought together public and private sector suppliers, including at least 3 of the Region's universities and a larger number of FE colleges, in partnership with several global software companies to deliver vendor-accredited programmes at various levels. HE students were not a significant proportion of the learners on these programmes. But they could have been; and even if successful participants had not had their success credited as part of their degrees, their employability would have been boosted through their acquisition of vendor-accredited qualifications.

11a. What further incentives are needed in universities – e.g. through internal appraisals, promotion processes – to increase demand from academic staff for business secondments?

There are three issues that need to be taken into account:

1. Secondment changes the person and the institution, there is never any going back to the 'same job', especially for key people.
2. Pension schemes need to cope with secondment on a no detriment basis for secondees.
3. University promotion criteria need to cover these aspects in practice as well as in theory. Essentially until universities really do value staff with secondment experience, then staff will tend not to risk being seconded, in case it adversely affects their career prospects.

11b. And how can we encourage movement in the other direction so that business people are increasingly contributing directly to course content, design and teaching?

1. Encouraging universities to offer key services such as compliance and testing services to enterprises in their sphere of influence would forge a bridge between business and HE that could be developed to also embrace the involvement of business in course content, design and delivery.
2. Use ICT services that allow asynchronous communication between businesses, learners on secondment and academic institutions, allowing businesses to access HE skills and HE to attract learners.
3. Involving people from business on course committees, and on validating boards, as well as in working as visiting guest lecturers. (The costs of releasing staff to participate in academe are high, and, typically, the rates of pay for part time teachers are a poor inducement for talented people from workplaces to make themselves available.)

12. How can we do more to increase the level of STEM skills in the existing workforce?

This is a classic task for distance and work based learning but DIUS must make this clear rather than relying on HEIs to work it out from hints!

Please let us have any other comments not covered by the above.

The focus on the HE at Work consultation was not on the application of technology to learning, and we have no issue with that fact. However, to the extent that:

1. Government sees ICT as a key component in the transformation of the public services (of which HE is an important part)
2. Internet-delivered knowledge and support is the single largest innovation in learning since the printing press

it was surprising to find that the consultation document was so lacking¹ in any references to, or questions about ICT, or about how, appropriately used, ICT might help meet the overall aim of 'more and more employable graduates'. Essentially the consultation seemed to be detached from the reality of modern

¹ The consultation document contained:

- one reference only to e-learning, in a case study about accreditation of work-based learning;
- one reference to distance learning, in relation to 2 year foundation degrees;
- one reference to learndirect, but not in the context of delivery;
- no references to JISC, Ufi, the Open University, or to ICT, technology, or the Internet (in the learning context);
- no references to Becta's Harnessing Technology Strategy;
- no references to Gowers, IPO, Intellectual Property, or IPR.

Meanwhile there were around 40 references to innovation.

learning delivery, and, despite its focus on innovation, rather isolated from important and relevant activities in the here and now, such as Ufi's learning through work programme, JISC's important infrastructure and content work, and, indeed, the work of Government entities like Becta.

We believe that DIUS policy on HE at Work (and on higher skills in the workforce generally) needs to take better account of the ways in which ICT can help the Government meet its objectives in relation to Higher Education at Work. Specifically, ICT can and should play an important role in enabling employees to develop and get recognition for their higher skills, in such a way that enterprises can easily and efficiently support staff in this process. We suggest that an additional, brief, and probably quite informal consultation is conducted by DIUS to tackle this issue, in which case ALT would be happy to contribute.

About ALT

The Association for Learning Technology (ALT), Registered Charity Number 1063519, is a professional body and scholarly association which seeks to bring together all those with an interest in the use of learning technology, which ALT defines as 'the broad range of communication, information and related technologies that can be used to support learning, teaching, and assessment'.

ALT has over 500 individual learning technologists as members and over 200 organisational and sponsoring members. The latter two categories include Becta, DCSF, DIUS, QIA, LSN, CEL, LSC, JISC, NIACE, UCU, Ufi, various large and small technology based companies, and over 150 learning providers spread mainly across the HE and FE sectors.

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