

Enterprise and Learning Committee

EL(3) 17-08 (p1) : 12 June 2008

Enquiry into the Economic Contribution of Higher Education:

Response from the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils

1. This summary document accompanies written submissions from the Network of Sector Skills Councils. It does not seek to summarise individual submissions which stand on their own for discussion at the committee. It seeks to provide a context for the committee by highlighting the core contribution SSCs are increasingly making in this area.
2. The Sector Skills Councils have now established the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils to help them co-ordinate their voice and to support collaborative activities between the SSCs. The Alliance is continuing to support a forum in Wales, which will be chaired by a Chief Executive elected from the SSCs, Stephen Studd the CEO of SkillsActive (the SSC for the Active Leisure and Learning Sector) has taken on this role and will ensure a link with the Board and Council of the Alliance.
3. The Alliance has also recently responded to the 'Skills That Work for Wales' consultation and look forward to working with the Welsh Assembly Government on its implementation. SSCs appreciated the recognition of SSCs in the document "A strong network of SSCs in Wales, working closely with employer bodies, will help to strengthen the employer voice in decisions in skills provision...SSCs will be the strategic interface between employers and the Assembly Government" (pg 12). The Alliance is committed to strengthening and supporting the role of its member SSCs in Wales to ensure this is a reality.
4. We have submitted evidence from 21 SSCs and the new Chair of the SSC Forum in Wales, Stephen Studd (the Chief Executive of SkillsActive) will lead a group of 13 representatives in meeting with the Committee, who will be able to answer questions on their specific sector submissions.

Themes

5. The essential characteristic of Sectors is that have a distinct mix of employment and skills needs and this is reflected in the detailed responses as each SSC works to identify the specific relationship that their employers need with the Higher Education network in Wales. However, we believe there are common themes which run through the submissions which may serve as a basis for further discussion.

Understanding the Role of Sector Skills Councils

6. Sector Skills Councils have been formed by employers and have been licensed by Government to give employers a co-ordinated voice and a lead role in driving forward the skills base of the UK thereby improving productivity and performance across the economy.
7. The role of a Sector Skills Council is to engage with employers in identifying the current and future employment and skill needs of their businesses. Then to identify the key occupations and to work with employers across the Sector to define a framework of National Standards of competence (national occupational standards) for each of those occupations. These standards then provide the basis for employers to identify, through their SSC, the qualifications and training that they need and will recognise as a route to employment.
8. These standards provide a common currency across the UK and enable the SSCs to advise in each country, on the development of the national credit and qualifications frameworks, based on the co-ordinated views of employers.
9. Sector Skills Agreements are nearly complete for each SSC in Wales and these provide an evidence basis for a strategic programme of action agreed with the Welsh assembly Government and key agencies and partners, including Higher Education.
10. Sector Qualifications Strategies are being developed as a clear statement from a Sector about the type of qualifications that are valued by employers. They are based around the national standards. Additionally, SSCs have responsibility for developing Apprenticeship frameworks which are based on these standards and qualifications.

11. In summary, SSCs offer Higher Education:

A coherent and researched evidence base on the future skill needs of each sector of the economy in Wales and the UK

A link to the co-ordinated and official voice of employers in a Sector and help to shape a programme so that it meets the needs of employment.

A clear route back to employers to explain and promote an understanding of their programmes

An opportunity for UK employment relevance for their prograSTmmes

From Education to Employment

12. A key measure of the economic value of Higher Education is the extent to which it provides a route to employment. The level of graduate recruitment varies by Sector and needs to be understood. A key criticism is of oversupply and the non-employment relevance of programmes.

13. The key partnership between SSCs and HEIs is to ensure a smooth transition between education and employment. A consistent concern from employers is the vocational relevance of degrees. It is recognised that not all degree programmes are designed to be specifically vocational - however individuals need to be able to make an informed choice. We need to be able to answer the question "if I want to be a.... then do I need a degree....and if so, which one?" In turn employers need to understand what skills are acquired by those with a particular degree.

14. Mapping degree programmes against the skills and knowledge articulated in the National Occupational Standards, produced by SSCs, can help this.

15. Many Sectors welcome the inclusion of work experience in a vocational degree programme, again this is something to explore with individual SSCs. Flexible delivery such as Foundation Degrees are proving a popular way in many sectors to link a university education with work. In these Sectors, SSCs welcome the opportunity to work with HEIs to shape the programme and content. Indeed, in the Alliance response to "Skills That Work For Wales" SSCs encouraged "more robust support" for the development of these foundation degree programmes in sectors where demand is evidenced.

16. Employers welcome bite-sized learning and flexible delivery that can support the development of their current employees in their career development. Up-skilling the current workforce is a key target for all Sectors. To be able to step back into Higher Education to develop new skills as your career develops is important for individuals and their employers. Many Sectors see this as the best investment for increasing HE numbers and raising skills levels. However, flexible delivery and the integration of distance learning and work-based project work are key components in these programmes.

17. Employers understand that graduates are often not the finished article. A few Sectors have explored the concept of "graduate apprenticeships" to help employers to provide a structured development pathway for graduates that can help embed themselves in the organisation and enable the employer to make the best use of graduate skills.

18. There is a need to ensure lecturers and college staff are up to date in their understanding of industry. SSCs can assist with this. For example, a successful exchange programme operates in Northern Ireland with the involvement of SSCs and Universities and colleges, enabling university staff to step back into industry to help them keep up to date with the latest developments. At the same time they can undertake a problem solving project to assist the employer.

Research and Technology

19. The development of higher level technical skills is important to certain hi-tech industries. Engagement with employers at the cutting edge of developments in these Sectors is crucial. From the submission it can be seen that individual SSCs offer to work with HEIs to shape the content to meet these changing needs.

20. HEIs are a key source of research and development expertise for industry and the economy.

Management and Leadership

21. SSCs work collaboratively on Management and Leadership. This remains a crucial factor in the performance of the economy. Poor management can undermine skills development and utilisation in the workplace.

22. SSCs would welcome discussion on plans to create a "centre of excellence" for management and leadership in Wales and to encourage collaboration between business schools.

23. Again this is an area which national standards have been developed by the collaborative efforts of the SSCs and with the involvement of the Welsh Management Centre.

24. This is an area where flexibility of delivery is crucial and where qualifications are regarded as less important than skills. Support programmes that help with problem solving and "action learning" have proved particularly successfully in an economy so dependent on small businesses. Again we would welcome a dialogue on this and the contribution of the University sector.

Conclusion

25. The partnerships between SSCs and Higher Education both collectively and individually can be a powerful one, harnessing the expertise of both and ensuring the best investment of public money to ensure the best returns for the economy and society in Wales.

26. The Sector Skills Agreements have opened the way for new relationships with individual institutions and HEFCW. In the submission there are many examples of emerging good practice which the SSCs will be pleased to discuss with Committee members.

27. Employers work in a UK wide labour market and indeed increasingly in a global market. Links with SSCs can help ensure not just that the needs of employers in Wales can be met but that the skills are transferable across an industry on a UK basis.

28. SSCs welcome a dialogue and on-going communication with Universities to help shape their offer to meet the needs of employment in their sector. We believe that the co-ordinated voice of employers is what will make the real impact in the partnership with the University sector.

Stephen Studd

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