

Enterprise and Learning Committee

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Engagement with Higher Education Institutions in Wales

About Skillfast-UK

Skillfast-UK is the Sector Skills Council for fashion and textiles. As a Sector Skills Council, we act as the voice of employers on skills issues in our sector. Through our employer engagement and skills intelligence work, we can help policy-makers, economic development agencies and skills bodies to understand the current and future skills needs of the sector, and what can be done to increase productivity and performance through skills.

Apparel, footwear and textiles is a large and vibrant sector in Wales, generating a total output of around £230m per year. Innovative and growing industries such as branded and designer fashion, technical textiles and a variety of craft activities serve to offset the long-term decline of the sector's traditional industries.

Although establishments with fewer than 50 employees account for 95 per cent of total establishments in Wales, medium size and larger establishments employ almost 60 per cent of the sector's workforce in Wales—a disproportionately high figure relative to the UK average. The age profile of the sector's workforce is skewed towards the older age bands relative to the UK norm. Less than one in ten of those employed are under the age of 25, while two-fifths of people working in the sector are aged 45 years or older.

Around 250 students are currently enrolled on sector-related higher education programmes in Wales.

Employer's priorities for Higher Education

Higher Education in Wales offers world-class teaching, and research, but there is room for improvement in businesses skills needs and engaging employers.

Skillfast-UK's employer engagement and skills intelligence work in Wales has identified how the Higher Education (HE) system can be improved to support them in meeting their skills needs.

The concerns expressed by employers match up well with the Committee's agenda, particularly:

Higher Education Institution's (HEIs) impact on the labour market and whether they are meeting the needs of businesses;

collaboration between HEIs and its impact on their local and regional economies;

entrepreneurial education and graduate start-up

They are set out in more detail in our Sector Skills Agreement for Wales and its associated documents

Welsh HE Policy

The draft Skills that Work for Wales strategy explicitly rejects a planned approach to meeting employers' needs and calls for funding to be moved to a demand-led workplace-based approach. Skillfast-UK warmly welcomes this approach as employers spend significant time with new graduate recruits topping up skills initiated within HE programmes. To enable employers to be recognised for the work they do, we call for this system to be introduced as quickly as possible. We support the proposal to allow high-quality providers to develop special expertise to offer training to businesses across Wales supported by the new funding system due to be announced in 2010 .

Delivering technical skills requires expensive equipment and specialist staff. Even with a demand-led funding system HE and Further Education (FE) will require capacity-building support to deliver the skills employers need. Skillfast-UK is already committed to developing working relationships with the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and both Further and Higher Education Institutes to support the development of a 'provider network', called Common Threads, to meet this need. Having held our inaugural conference on the 8th April 2008 with a keynote speech from Mr John Griffiths AM, Deputy Minister for Skills, we anticipate building this network to provide a sound base for employer engagement with HE.

Skills that Work for Wales proposes that business support and skills support should be offered through a joint brokerage system. We support this approach because changes in business strategy can create demand for skills and learning. We are pleased that the report recognises the need for brokers to have sector-specific knowledge. Skillfast-UK is currently in discussion with the Assembly about how this offer to employers and employees can be developed and we are hopeful that we will make significant progress during the summer months.

We are encouraged that the Assembly Government is considering greater support for Foundation Degrees, as recommended by the Webb Review, because they have the potential to support the development of higher-level work-relevant skills for those in employment. However, too many Foundation Degrees are currently being delivered on a full time basis. HE must explore how they can effectively meet the needs of non-traditional learners, in an effort to increase the use of a vocational route into higher education, particularly if the Assembly decides to adopt a Foundation Degree approach to higher level skills in the workplace. Skillfast-UK looks forward to working with colleagues in academia to agree processes for accrediting work-based learning at this level including recognition for bespoke and short courses and for the inclusion of this provision within the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW).

Many employers recognise the value of engaging with HE however, they have reservations in committing to partnerships that involve research and product development. In order for businesses to have an incentive to collaborate with HE, institutions need to allow businesses to part-own any resulting Intellectual Property from such activity.

Skillfast-UK is also concerned that many fashion design degrees do not prepare students effectively for work in the sector due to a lack of technical and commercial skills. We would encourage HE to consider the use of National Occupational Standards, where they exist, to align their offers to students to potential job roles within the sector.

Skillfast-UK's HE activity

Provider network (Common Threads)

On the 20th September 2007 Skillfast-UK met with Higher Education Funding Council Wales (HEFCW) to discuss support for HEIs and to meet the skills needs outlined in the Sector Skills Agreement. Since then we have engaged with the following institutions to progress this agenda:

University of Wales Institute Cardiff (UWIC)

University of Wales College Newport (UWCN)

University of Glamorgan

Swansea Metropolitan University

We have since held our first Common Threads network meeting and are looking forward to working with colleagues to implement our Sector Qualifications Strategy in Wales.

Specialist Groups in Higher Education

Skillfast-UK has also been involved in three specialist groups relevant to the fashion and textiles sector:

The Smart Clothing and Wearable Technology Group

This is a group comprising HE institutions in Wales who have an interest in smart clothing and wearable technology and the Textile Institute. This group has developed training modules at Level 4 in collaboration with the University of Wales College Newport and in partnership with the University of Wales Institute Cardiff, and training modules at Level 3 with Coleg Sir Gar. This development was supported by a Knowledge Exploitation Fund.

New Dynamics of Ageing

The Smart Clothing and Wearable Technology Research Group has also invited Skillfast-UK onto the Steering group for the New Dynamics of Ageing project which is currently being developed.

The Smart Clothing and Wearable Technology Research Group

A Special Interest Group has also been set up at University of Wales College Newport, through the Textile Institute, for Smart Clothing and Wearable Technology and Skillfast-UK have been asked to join this group.

Skillfast-UK has also been invited by University of Wales College Newport to initial discussions on the writing of a Master's level programme in Smart Clothes and Wearable Technology for the next generation of textile based 'wearables' that include performance sportswear, travel wear, corporate work wear, everyday clothing for the 'New Consumer Majority' (50+) to take place 4th June.

Logistics and supply-chain

We have also been approached by Cardiff Business School with regard to a research paper they are keen to work on, exploring logistics and supply chain management for our sector in Wales.

Foundation Degrees

WE recognise that the Assembly are currently considering the potential for Foundation Degrees in Wales. Skillfast-UK also recognise that a vocational route into higher education is imperative for our sector given the current demographics of employment and the need to

raise skills levels. To this end we are currently working on vocational programmes for application at CQFW levels 4 and 5 that assist design graduates in gaining skills in Business Development. At a UK level Linda Florance, our Chief-Executive sits on the board of Foundation Degree Forward and is contributing to the wider development of the Foundation Degrees.

Careers and Training Guidance

Skillfast-UK employ a member of staff to support information, advice and guidance professionals and the broader services of Careers Wales.

We run careers campaigns including Can U Cut It? - for those interested in a career in fashion - and Future Textiles, which highlights the technical textiles sector and associated career opportunities.

Skillfast-UK also produces a Labour Market Intelligence pack, job profiles (hosted on our "Just the Job" website) and offers Labour Market Intelligence workshops for careers advisors. We intend to formalise arrangements through a Memorandum of Understanding with Careers Wales in due course.

We have also worked with Techni-Tex, the Faraday Partnership for Textiles, to develop Careers profiles for the sector and to promote the sector.

Research into HE teaching of Design

Skillfast-UK has commissioned a major piece of research, in conjunction with the HEI subject centre in Art Design and Media Subject Centre of the Higher Education Academy, to look at the teaching of Design at HE level, engagement of employers as part of that process and how to make degree programmes more relevant to the needs of the labour market. It will include a close look at the role of employers in work placement, technical skills delivery and programme design.

National Occupational Standards

Skillfast-UK recognise the importance of higher level skills in developing and sustaining the Welsh economy. We also recognise that these skills need to be put to good use to maximise opportunities for employers and individuals. To ensure that employers can assess the competence of this highly qualified work, we are currently developing National Occupational Standards for use at Level 4 and above for Fashion & Textiles Design and Technical Textiles.

Conclusion

Skillfast-UK is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the committee's review of Higher Education in Wales and hope that the committee will accept our apologies that no witness was available from the sector to attend the meeting. However we would be very pleased to go in to more detail about any of the points raised in this response, should committee members wish to do so.

We can be contacted through our Country Manager for Wales, Lynne Abbott. Tel: 07834 440121