

A STRATEGY FOR ENTERPRISE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

Ann Tate*

The concept of enterprise has appeared in a variety of contexts and forms over the last decade or so, and this myriad of meanings has not been helpful in the promotion in Universities of what is known as Enterprise in Higher Education. In order to bring some clarity to the discussion, it is necessary first of all to rehearse some of the more common connotations of "enterprise" before going on to analyse the factors which encouraged the development and promotion of the Enterprise in Higher Education programme in general, and in the University of Ulster in particular. I shall then discuss some of the more significant achievements of the programme to date.

Definitions of Enterprise and its relationship to Higher Education

For most people, enterprise is inevitably associated with business in some way – and in Northern Ireland it is usually associated with small businesses which may be organised into enterprise zones or centres. This association between small business and 'enterprise' is well founded – Lord Young argued that the number of business start-ups and self employed is an indicator of the successful spread of an 'enterprise culture'. He further suggested that "The basis of the enterprise culture lies with the restoration of the age of the individual. Individuals must be given the

* Director of the Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) Unit at the University of Ulster.

scope to develop their skills, take on responsibility and use their personal initiative” (Young 1992). On a broader front, enterprise is associated with being entrepreneurial – again usually in the context of private industry. In this context, the idea of enterprise (as being attached as an adjective to persons) gained popularity during the Thatcher era in the 1980s where it was held as the ideal quality to engender in all of the population if economic recovery was to be assured. Whilst the Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative has its origins in this political and economic context – and indeed has as its key aim the “encouragement of the development of *qualities of enterprise* amongst those seeking higher education qualifications” (Training Agency 1988) it is by no means confined in its application to the development of a narrowly defined range of business skills in undergraduates, nor does it necessarily encourage a higher level of “economic awareness”. One of the most interesting aspects of the Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative, as it has been interpreted across the higher education system in the U.K., is the breadth of meaning that has been attached to the concept of enterprise. In the main, institutions of higher education have taken enterprise to consist of a range of broadly personal and transferable skills, which initially may be applied to the process of being a student, and thence to a range of occupations and professions in both the public and private sectors. However, all of the above begs the necessary question as to why such an initiative was deemed necessary at all. It could be legitimately argued that the whole *experience* of a higher education curriculum was underpinned by the ‘liberal’ ethos which focused on the development of a range of transferable skills and abilities such as critical thinking; self analysis and assessment; sensitivity to others; respect for argument and rational debate – and many others. Whilst higher education institutions may have thought this to be the case, those who employed graduates however were beginning to express quite contrary views: Universities and Polytechnics were the object of comments from employers both individually and collectively suggesting that the focus on the acquisition of ever increasing amounts of knowledge, and the method of delivery of that knowledge to undergraduates was counterproductive. This comment from the Council for Industry and Higher Education is typical of many –

“Given rapid changes in the world of work, we believe that higher education must equip its students with the capacity, both intellectual and personal to adapt readily to meet diverse changes. The mental furniture includes a sound understanding of how things work along with a specialist knowledge

of a subject. In addition, employers will increasingly expect higher education to give a grounding in personal skills: communication; problem-solving; teamwork; leadership. In many instances, this will be achieved by changing the learning process from passive absorption to active participation”.

Thus, it was clear that a response was needed to such criticism – especially given the prevalent political and economic climate of the time. The Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative was launched in December 1987 by the Employment Department in the U.K. (specifically by what was known at the time as the Manpower Services Commission – later to become the Training Agency and now known as the Training, Employment and Education Directorate). The broad aims of EHE are that:

- Every person seeking a higher education qualification should be able to develop competencies and aptitudes relevant to enterprise;
- these competencies and aptitudes should be acquired at least in part through project-based work designed to be undertaken in a real economic setting which should be jointly assessed by employers and the students’ higher education institution (Training Agency 1988).

As we can clearly see, the aims of the Initiative respond directly to the concerns expressed by industrialists and politicians about the need for greater accommodation between higher education and industry by using the concept of enterprise as directly mediating the needs of the two partners in the process. The Initiative was underpinned by the promise of up to £1m in funding over a five year period to those Higher Education Institutions which could devise strategies for the development of an institutional framework which assured students of opportunities to acquire enterprise competencies. The interesting feature of the progress of the initiative over the last five years across some sixty different institutions of higher education in the U.K., is the way in which that accommodation has not brought about a radical shift in the orientation of those institutions. Rather, it has been embraced by higher education and reshaped to meet felt needs for curriculum reform which initially benefit the ability of individuals to become better students, and only really as a secondary consequence, to become more ‘enterprising’ recruits and employees. The experience of the Initiative at the University of Ulster provides a good example of this process.

Enterprise in Higher Education at the University of Ulster

Within the broad aims of the Initiative, the EHE objectives at the University of Ulster are:

- The acquisition by students of the key personal and interpersonal enterprise competencies, including the skill of learning how to learn;
- The provision of opportunities for students to apply these competencies in a range of workplace, social and community settings;
- The active involvement of employers as our partners in the implementation of the programme;
- Changes in the methods of teaching, learning and student assessment, and in the content of the curriculum, which will provide a basis for the development of enterprise competencies;
- A comprehensive staff development programme fully integrated within the broad enterprise initiative.

The strategy devised for achieving these objectives over the five year funding period focused on three areas of intervention – curriculum change; staff development and the enhancement of existing employer partnerships (usually through the integrated sandwich placement programme). Underpinning the strategy was a recognition that if the objectives were to be realised, then the existing strengths and advantages of the institution had to be harnessed and refocused – thus minimising the inevitable resistance of staff whose existing practice was being called into question by the Initiative. (There was likely to be resistance from staff who reacted to the ideological symbolism of the concept of enterprise – I shall return to this later).

Thus, the EHE Initiative in the University of Ulster may be characterised not so much as colonisation, but more akin to infiltration. A key feature of this strategy of infiltration capitalised upon existing procedures for course approval and renewal in the Institution which broadly followed those established in the earlier Polytechnic stage of the development of U.U. and were based upon the Council for National Academic Awards processes of quality assurance. This follows a quinquennial cycle wherein each programme has to resubmit for validation and approval, and an annual review to monitor the health and progress of each course. It was therefore a relatively easy mechanism to use to implement what is fundamentally a curriculum development initiative. From the beginning

of the project, each course presenting for revalidation was required to demonstrate the ways in which it was providing the opportunity for the development of enterprise competencies in students. It was crucial to the success of the Initiative however, that there was sufficient flexibility allowed in the way course teams defined enterprise in the context of their own programme and its key aims and objectives. In order to allow staff the opportunity to get a feeling for what enterprise might mean in relation to their own discipline or profession, the project encouraged groups of staff to bring forward proposals for experimental innovations in curriculum development and delivery which EHE would support, fund and assist with evaluation. This exemplified in its own practice the experiential approach to curriculum development that it was attempting to promote across the University as a whole. It was recognised at the outset, that there could be little meaningful curriculum development without related and dedicated staff development. The approach to staff development in support of the EHE Initiative emphasises learning through practice and feedback. Thus, the initiative very quickly moved away from mounting courses in various aspects of enterprising curriculum development – in such areas as assessment of competence; student centred learning; teaching styles etc – to dealing directly with course teams and other small groups of staff in identifying the pedagogical problems associated with the development of enterprise competencies in their own students, and trying to perceive problems. Staff thus learned about curriculum development using a problem-based learning approach.

The third aspect of the implementation strategy for EHE in the University of Ulster involved the enhancement of employer partnerships in order to make more explicit the role of work-based learning. As with curriculum development, the strategy identified the key areas of strength already existing in this area. These were, a well founded sandwich placement programme operating across the University and involving some 900 students each year; a large teaching company programme for graduate development; an orientation towards community and occupational relevance in the development of curricula and a history of close cooperation with industrial and professional bodies in the planning and delivery of courses. Thus, any impact that EHE was to be able to make in employer development was likely to be qualitative rather than quantitative – i.e. doing it better rather than doing more of it. This process was certainly facilitated by employers themselves stressing more generalised enterprise competencies in their graduate recruitment literature and in their graduate development programmes. It

was inhibited however, by the preponderance of small companies in Northern Ireland who had little or no experience in graduate recruitment or work-based learning at undergraduate level. Thus, the strategy for implementing EHE at the University of Ulster involved curriculum development in partnership with employers and professional associations which emphasised the development of opportunities for students to become more “enterprising” in the context of their chosen course, and the process was underpinned by specific and focused staff development and educational development. Taken together, the sum of such strategic interventions provided a platform for wider institutional change, thereby setting in place the overall framework within which the development of more enterprising undergraduates would be firmly supported.

Interpreting Enterprise at U.U.

Since the launch of the programme in October 1990, the EHE Initiative has made significant progress on all three strategic fronts, but the experience of implementing EHE has highlighted the ways in which the concept has become reconceptualised and reconstructed in use. The initial phase of curriculum implementation involved ‘auditing’ existing curricula to ascertain the extent to which students were able to avail themselves of opportunities to develop “enterprise” competencies. In order to assist in this reflexive process, a checklist of competencies (described elsewhere in this monograph) was provided *but no explanations of what these might mean or examples were given*. Thus, it was very much left to course tutors to interpret the competencies in the light of their knowledge of the taught programmes. Whilst this approach would have been invalid as the basis of a research exercise (where conceptual meanings and indicators have to be constant across cases), the ‘audit’ procedure was meant to be as much a consciousness raising exercise with course tutors, encouraging them to reflect on their programmes from a new perspective, as it was a fact finding exercise to provide a rough base line against which EHE progress could be charted. This approach to curriculum development was endorsed at an early stage by the Training, Employment and Education Directorate who suggested that “The initiative is essentially developmental. In a new programme, diversity and flexibility are essential. Experimenting with different approaches, reviewing the experience and sharing the information are all part of the development process”. (TEED 1989).

The results of the audit process revealed a hidden cache of good practice in relation to curriculum delivery for enterprise. The key reason why such good practice remained hidden was of course that the processes of teaching and learning were in the main not regarded as worthy of being brought into the public domain. No significant rewards – either status or pecuniary were attached to good teaching, and the overall culture of the institution stressed the importance of research as a vehicle for institutional and personal prestige and income generation. *EHE was the first significant initiative to positively reward good practice in curriculum delivery.* (I shall return to the importance of this for institutional change and development later on.)

Whilst the audit process did not allow for a consistent baseline to be established across the University as a whole, for individual courses and programmes, it provided a platform for further development – either by enhancing areas of existing strength and achievement or by looking to areas of potential. The process of curriculum review (which formed an existing element in the quinquennial course review cycle) could now point to such areas in the proposals for on-going curriculum development. At the time of writing, some forty courses have presented themselves for revalidation and have incorporated into their curriculum plans, suggested means of enhancing opportunities for enterprise competence development in students. Common characteristics of such plans include – greater involvement of students in the negotiation of the curriculum; greater use of group work, learning teams and peer group learning; increasing use of self and peer assessment; greater variety in assessment modes and more effective use of seminars and tutorials for the development of presentation and communication skills.

Whilst the initial stages of feedback monitoring and evaluation have been extremely positive both from students and staff, we must exercise some caution about the longer term structural implications i.e. whether such innovations become permanent features of the course or whether they become casualties of pressure from other quarters such as the need for staff to engage in research or the increased number and variety of students enrolling on courses. In time, the longitudinal survey (Leckey, this volume) may reveal a more definitive outcome.

The associated staff development programme used much the same methodology to establish general acceptance i.e. capitalising on strengths and existing good practice and dissemination of exemplars of ‘enterprising’ teaching.

The broad strategy utilised an approach that Susan Weil has characterised as “dislodging” (Weil 1992). She argued that organisational change, produces the emergence of three groups of staff which she described as ‘keenies’ ‘yes-buts’ and ‘not-over-my-dead-bodies’. As their name implies, ‘keenies’ are those who have been awaiting an opportunity such as the envisaged change affords, and will avail themselves of that opportunity to pursue ends which they now perceive to be compatible with the changes. At the other extreme there are the ‘not-over-my-dead-bodies’. These would be that group referred to earlier who would be fundamentally – perhaps ideologically – opposed to the very idea of enterprise in higher education. For this group, the initiative provoked a high level of defensiveness and denial of the need to change. Between these two extremes sits the majority of staff who are the ‘yes-buts’. These staff recognise the importance and necessity of the proposed changes, but feel at a loss in relation to their ability to sustain the change. The majority of energy and effort in the management of the EHE staff development programme was channelled towards these staff. The strategy adopted was to confront directly problems staff were facing in relation to their pedagogical practice and to introduce them to ‘solutions’ which promoted the aims of EHE whilst at the same time not distorting the objectives of the teaching and learning strategy for the course. This is a delicate balancing act which we are still learning to get right, but I believe has much greater longer term possibilities for actual practical changes in staff behaviour, than simply initiating and delivering a series of interesting seminars and workshops for academic staff.

One of the first tangible ‘products’ to emerge from EHE staff development activity is a Directory of Innovations in Teaching and Learning – an in-house publication by staff for staff which highlights good practice and disseminates this to a wider audience. On a less tangible level, small informal networks of staff are being established around particular teaching and learning issues and interests, and these offer benefits of mutual support, encouragement and public validation of what otherwise might appear to be maverick behaviour vis-à-vis the relatively low prestige accorded to innovations in this area.

Perhaps the area of greater difficulty in the implementation of EHE has been the third facet of the strategy – the enhancement of employer partnerships. As I mentioned earlier, the University already had considerable strength in this area – notably in the wide application of various forms of ‘sandwich’ placement ranging from the one year paid placement usually in the penultimate year of the course, to

short (six week) periods of work experience undertaken during term time on an unpaid basis. The role for EHE therefore became not so much one of doing more, but doing it better. In addition, the idea of "project-based work in real settings" was extended into the final year of the student's course and involved the promotion of community based projects for final year dissertations rather than the usual theoretical or library-based thesis.

It was particularly unfortunate that the development of the EHE strategy vis a vis employers coincided with the economic recession which had profound implications for recruitment and training in companies, both large and small. As a result the success of EHE in this area has been less than was originally hoped. Where difficulties were encountered in even obtaining placements for students, there was little enthusiasm or incentive to worry about the quality of the experience. However, the current crisis in sandwich placement has stimulated a much broader review of the process as a whole involving consideration of other models of integrating work-based learning within an academic curriculum. This review process is on-going but there is little doubt that the results of the review will be a useful lever for the EHE process in relation to employer partnerships.

Another significant development which is likely to assist in the promotion of EHE aims and objectives is the establishment of National Education and Training targets; allied to the new National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) structure. This movement, although politically inspired is industry-led and emphasises the achievement of qualifications against specified outcomes or standards in the context of the workplace. In the longer term, especially in respect of the higher level (professional) NVQs, this implies a much closer integration of the theoretical and knowledge underpinning of courses leading to professional qualifications, and the assessment of performance in the workplace. Employers and professional associations will need to work very closely with institutions of higher education in order to reach common understandings of the appropriate competencies to be learned and the standards to be achieved. The greater the opportunity for the development of a common language around the concept of competence between industry and higher education, the greater the chances of the underlying philosophy of EHE being fulfilled.

Having reviewed the implementation and some initial outcomes of EHE in relation to the constituent parts of the strategy, I would like to conclude with some tentative remarks about the effects of the programme on the institution, bearing in

mind that one of the perennial problems in discussing organisational changes of any kind is to isolate relevant cause and effects. In the case of EHE, at the time the project was being implemented initially, the institution was itself changing both as a result of changes in its environment, but also as a result of conscious internal interventions.

To what extent therefore could the changes that might be attributed to EHE be attributed instead to a series of quite different causes and deliberate interventions? We shall never know for certain, but I would like to argue the case that EHE has performed a rather unique function for the institution as a whole over the past two years or so, the consequences of which has been to drive a series of changes that otherwise might have not achieved such a high profile.

This institutional function can be likened to an industrial “R and D” role. EHE acts as a catalyst for discussion of issues which whilst pertinent to its own aims and objectives, have a much wider referent in the institution and is the first point of action in relation to emerging issues such as NVQs and HE; the accreditation of prior experiential learning and workplace learning; the implications of the growth in student numbers for the quality of learning and the development of strategies to encourage greater student learning autonomy.

Because EHE acts outside, and often independently of, the formal structures within the institution, it draws in staff from a variety of positions in the organisation, who work together around a particular task. In working with EHE in this way, staff become attuned to reflecting on the organisation as a whole and not simply their particular department, discipline or function. Such an awareness on the part of members of an organisation is an essential pre-requisite of meaningful cultural change without which no intervention will have any significant impact.

Conclusion

The experience of implementing a programme such as EHE, which has at its heart, conscious organisational change, has served above all to exemplify the prevalence of unintended consequences of social action. Whilst many of the key aims and objectives of the programme have been, or are well on course towards being realised, EHE has stimulated, promoted and sustained a variety of other, unanticipated outcomes, particularly at the institutional level, which will ensure that those institutions become significantly changed, and remain so, long after the funding has expired.

References

- Training Agency, 1988, Key features of the second round EHE proposals. *Department of Employment*, Sheffield.
- Training Employment and Education Directorate, 1989, An introduction to the Enterprise Curriculum. *Department of Employment*, Sheffield.
- Weil, S., 1992, 'Learning to Change' in Managing Fundamental Change. *Office of Public Management Monograph*. London.
- Young, D., 1992, Quoted in Morris P "Freeing the Spirit of Enterprise" in Keat (ed) *Enterprise Culture*.