

HIGHER EDUCATION: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TRIPARTITE ALLIANCE

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Introduction

During the 1970s and early 1980s concerns were voiced that traditional education programmes were failing to address the needs of both learners and industry. Prime Minister James Callaghan's speech at Ruskin College in October 1976 was only one of the catalysts – albeit a major catalyst – which culminated in the ongoing appraisal and revision of the function and content of educational provision. How to prepare young people for what is an uncertain future resulted in innovations such as the National Curriculum and TEVI and the debate about core skills for 16–19 year olds. In the realm of Higher Education an attempt is being made to meet this challenge through the development of the Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) initiative – the focus of which has been designed to promote the enterprising student and address the needs of both learners and employers. This initiative was launched by the Secretary of State for Employment in December 1987.

More recently a report of the Industrial Research and Development Advisory Committee of the Commission of the EC stated that:

“the output of education and training systems (including in particular higher education) in terms of both quantity and quality of skills at all levels is a

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prime determinant of a country's level of industrial productivity, and hence competitiveness".

Today more people perceive education and educational qualifications to be an investment in their future and not a chore imposed by society. This will manifest itself in the demand for more places in higher and further education. There is already an increasing trend whereby many people today experience one or more career changes during their working lives and a significant proportion of today's graduates change both their job and employment sector within five years of graduating.

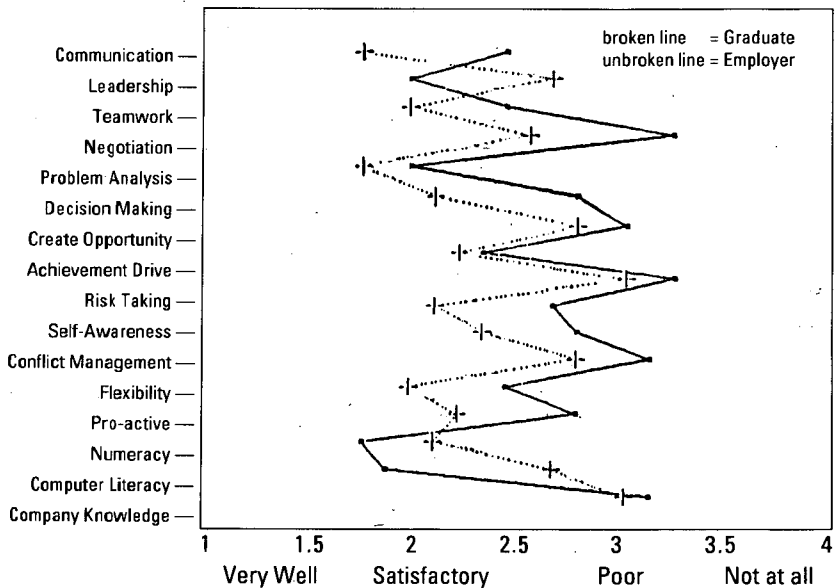
It is in the context of these facts that the EHE initiative is being developed in approximately 60 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) throughout the United Kingdom. Within the University of Ulster the definition of enterprise adopted is a broad one and not confined to the narrow popular conception of the term which equates it with entrepreneurship in a business setting. Rather the emphasis is placed on the development in the undergraduate population of a repertoire of personal transferable skills. Before the introduction of EHE it was generally assumed that personal skills developed out of education and students became independent thinkers because they were capable of teaching themselves. This assumption has been shown to be incorrect by Brennan and McGeevor (1988, p 120) who found that "co-operation" and "leadership" ranked very low in the list of benefits which graduates thought they had derived from higher education. Furthermore, a significant number of graduates, two years after graduation, also felt that they had had insufficient opportunity to develop skills in oral communication, numeracy and computing during their higher education careers. Thus the focus of EHE within the University of Ulster is to be the enterprising student – but what are the elements – the skills which if acquired and used make the enterprising student? There is no shortage of information in this area, including the work of Boyatzis, Whetten and Cameron, Porter and McKibben and EHE inspired work at Sheffield and Durham. It was by a process of debate, discussion and analysis of the key authors that those involved in developing the proposal for funding to the Department of Economic Development (NI) arrived at a list of 17 personal skills (see Figure 1).

Personal Transferable Skills

These 17 personal skills (or personal transferable skills) were piloted and then tested in a survey of 100 companies in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland

and Great Britain who recruit graduates, and also with 200 recent graduates from the University of Ulster. The 17 personal skills were carefully described in behavioural terms which would indicate their presence. The results of this survey have been reported elsewhere in this journal (see Thompson) but it is interesting to note in Figure 1 that the perceptions of the development of personal skills by both employers and graduates were such that not one of the 17 skills was perceived to have been developed either very well or not at all.

Figure 1: Comparison of Employer/Graduate Results – Development of Personal Skills



Furthermore, the employers view the universities' ability to develop personal skills less favourably than do the graduates, with the gap being largest for personal rather than group skills.

A Tripartite Alliance

The delivery of EHE is based on a three way partnership. This partnership comprises of the University's students, its staff and employers. The University of Ulster – through its polytechnic roots – was most fortunate to have extremely

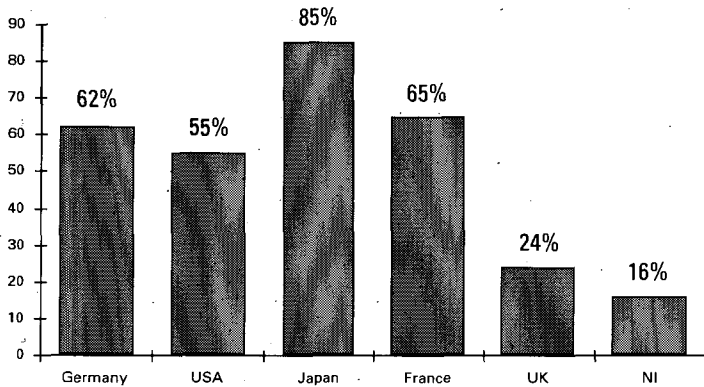
strong links with employers, but it is essentially through the curriculum that enterprise will be delivered to the students. Historically, employer-links have existed in vocational or professionally accredited courses such as law, engineering, architecture, medicine or teaching and more latterly in Business and Accountancy – now there is the challenge to develop these links in many other courses. The knowledge gained from the survey in relation to the development of personal skills must be taken into account when preparing graduates for the world of work. This being so, the University has identified strategies which are being introduced to assist the development of the relevant personal skills portfolios for all graduates and enhance the employer, student, educator alliance. These are:

- Introduction of work placement and experience for both students and teaching staff into a wider range of courses.
- More explicit acknowledgement of the needs of employers, including employer input to courses and assessment, and an improved careers service to students.
- Changes to the structure of courses to include a stronger developmental element, particularly by including personal skills development objectives.
- Changes to the content of courses, including more use of project (particularly group project) work, new forms of assessment, and the provision of management/business awareness modules.

Graduates in Management

It is envisaged that by the year 1995 the full-time degree student population in the University of Ulster will be 7,250. At the present time the total number of undergraduate students on paid and unpaid placements together is 1,500, of which paid placements are 900, and unpaid 600. Only 75% of those who graduate will stay in Northern Ireland.

An examination of the UK's main trading rivals emphasises that in the UK, and in Northern Ireland in particular, the graduate is under-represented at managerial levels (see Figure 2). Furthermore, in following the American model of postgraduate and post-experience business schools the UK output of MBAs and undergraduates falls short of the USA production by a factor of 10.

Figure 2: Percentage of Managers with Degrees

Sources: Silver, M., 1991 & T&EA Report, 1992

The 1985 Labour Force Survey suggests that in the UK there is an annual requirement for some 90,000 new managers. A crude extrapolation of this data would indicate a requirement of some 1,500–2,000 graduate entrants into industry and commerce in Northern Ireland. Of approximately 1,000 business and business related graduates produced in Northern Ireland annually some 25% leave the Province. Of the remainder, some 50% will go into the non-manufacturing sector, leaving only 400 for perhaps 1,500 new entrant management positions. These indicative figures (and they are only that) suggest the obvious – that if Northern Ireland is to increase the percentage of graduates in management then inevitably most of the new entrants will come from a non-business degree background. This trend is clearly evidenced in the intake for the Graduate Development Scheme for 1992. Of 200 students on this entry to business programme 70% came from an Arts and Social Sciences background.

EHE and Entry to Management

The results of the pilot survey, and the data on new entrants to management in Northern Ireland, are important in relation to the development of EHE and raise a number of interesting questions:

- Can EHE assist in the provision of an appropriate base for non-business graduates?

- Can EHE enhance the skills provision for business graduates?
- Though outside the current remit of the University of Ulster EHE scheme, should we be doing more in the area of skills development for our postgraduate students – both business and non-business?

Underlying these questions there are three major concepts. These are training, education and development. Before attempting to answer the questions posed, what do we mean by these terms? A simple definition of training may be that it is a process that is concerned with the acquisition and development of specific skills to do particular activities or jobs. Education contrasts with training in that it is a process concerned with the acquisition and development of knowledge and skills which equip individuals to take on a particular role. Thus it overlaps with training. Development, however, may be seen as a means of equipping and helping an individual to take on jobs at different levels or in different spheres, and as such it may embrace both training and education activities.

The answer to the questions posed above is a qualified yes, EHE can provide a suitable base for non-business graduates and it can also enhance the provision for business graduates and postgraduates – if we accept:

- that the EHE initiative came into existence due to the identification of the need for a more enterprising educational base within our institutions of higher education;
- the need for this development to be placed in the context of a tripartite alliance – staff, student and employer; and
- if there is a genuine commitment from all parties concerned to accept change.

The traditional approach for the non-business graduate to assist the transition into industry has been the “bolt-on” awareness raising module. Whilst this is undoubtedly valuable for the non-business graduate, its shortcomings are obvious. It produces potential managers with knowledge about management, but gives no help in developing the necessary skills in how to manage. The EHE approach of developing a range of transferable skills on a “bolt-in” to the curriculum principle, offers the potential employer a graduate manager with appropriate enhanced skills. Enhanced in the sense that it becomes a routine part of course assessment that the student will be required to demonstrate their ability to deliver on the full range of transferable skills. EHE will seek to make, as part of the tripartite alliance, employers aware that in the future University of Ulster graduates, from a range of

disciplines, will be equipped with a repertoire of personal skills that are readily transferable to their organisations. The dual processes of improved communication and skills development will, in time, provide enhanced opportunities for the non-business graduate.

The strong emphasis on industrial placement in undergraduate business programmes at the University of Ulster, and the ensuing close contact with industry, has unquestionably impacted on the high acceptability of these students to industry and commerce. Yet within these business courses little systematic effort has been made to develop, in any meaningful way other than by placement exposure, an acceptable range of basic managerial competencies. The development of professional skills and knowledge is vital, but must be allied with the development of individual competence.

Albanese (1986) comments on the business educational process.

“No one advocates eliminating cognitive learning, but there is a need for more balance between cognitive learning and skills training.”

The EHE initiative provides a focus for reviewing this balance. The encouragement to develop and assess personal skills; to critically examine means of increasing the effectiveness of the sandwich year; to innovate new learning and assessment approaches; and to improve employer partnerships can act as a catalyst for change and ultimately develop more able young managers.

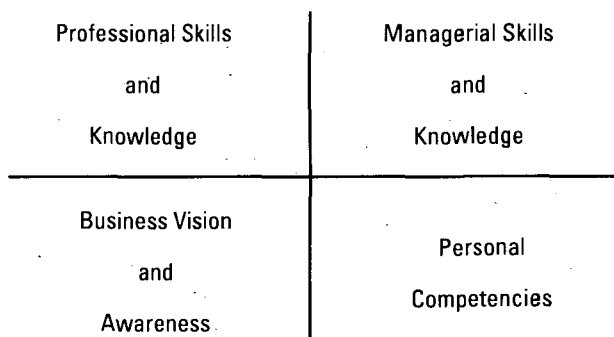
Kakabadse (1992), using data from the national Executive survey, shows that the average high calibre executive in the UK attains a senior management position at 32 years of age, and promotion to Chief Executive officer at 41 years of age. For the postgraduate student seeking to progress in management there are, therefore, two developmental career windows of about eight years each. It is in preparation for the first of these career phases that the content of postgraduate programmes can have a significant effect. On the assumption that the key transferable skills are developed at the undergraduate level, what additional skills should the postgraduate student seek to develop?

The futurists such as Toffler, Aburdene, Morgan, Handy and Druker tell us that the organisation of the future will be smaller, flatter, less bureaucratic and will operate in networks rather than pyramids. They further predict that some of the qualities that executives will need in this new environment will centre around proactivity, entrepreneurial flair, leadership, creativity, vision and managing discontinuity. These, and similar, competencies or meta competencies, can and

should be developed in the postgraduate course of the future. The part-time postgraduate students by definition have an action centred framework for development in their workplace. The full-time postgraduate is reliant on action centred opportunities being created within the curriculum. The challenge to the University is to successfully integrate the development of meta competencies, within the postgraduate curriculum and assessment structure, without fundamentally changing the specialist nature of these courses.

A variation on Richard Boyatzis four quadrant model (Figure 3) may provide a useful framework for such integration. In particular, if we are to produce postgraduate students equipped for the industrial and commercial future then attention must be paid for all four quadrants and not, as is currently the case, concentrate on the top left and top right quadrants.

Figure 3: Boyatzis Quadrant Model



The development of meta competencies in postgraduate students is, in light of the Enterprise in Higher Education initiative, both logical and essential.

The current lack of success reflected in the employers' and students' view on how good we are at developing key personal transferable skills, never mind meta competencies, may further promote the need to move away from what Lupton calls "fields of knowledge" to "fields of action" not only in our business schools but throughout the University as a whole.

Figure 4: Fields of Knowledge / Fields of Action

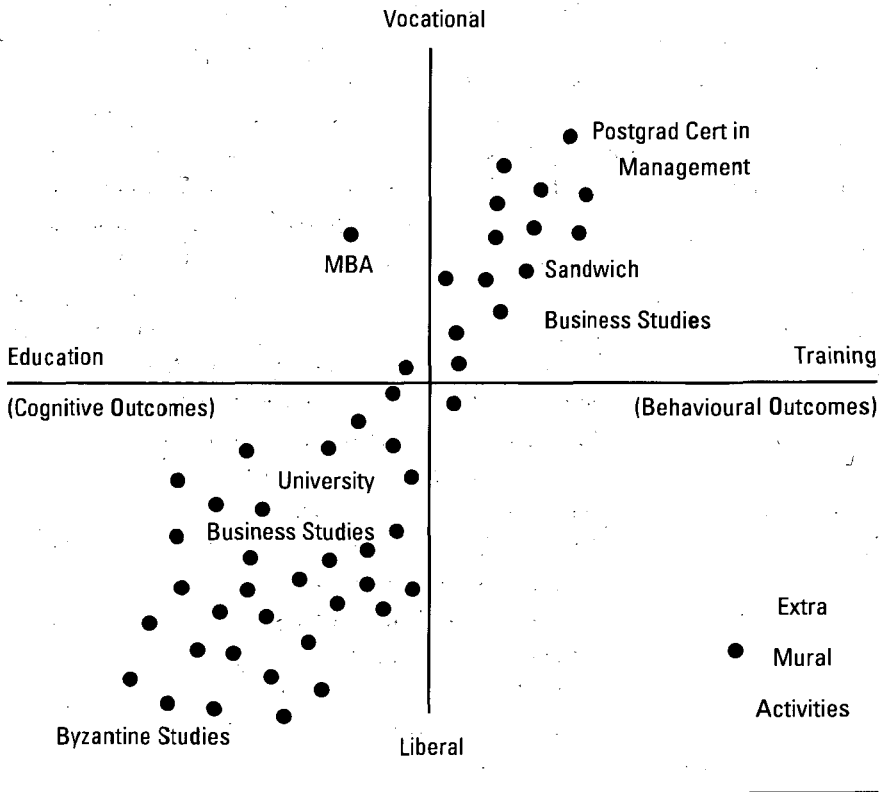


Figure 4, polarising education and training and a vocational and liberal emphasis, attempts to demonstrate some extreme positions in terms of University courses. The inculcation of skills and competence development within the curriculum will have some effect on the relative positioning of courses over time. Whilst the exact positioning of any course is a matter of opinion, an increase in student placement will produce a much more dramatic shift to the top right quadrant. Not only will this increase the training/vocational content of courses, but it also fuels, in part, a change from traditional forms of learning to an action learning approach. Action learning is becoming a widely accepted methodology for developing managers and

management competence in both certificated and organisationally based programmes. It is described by Lessem (1982, p 12) as follows:

“Action learning at its simplest, is an approach to management education. At its most profound it is a form of personal therapy, a means of social and economic transformation, and even a way of life.”

The Business and Management Faculty in particular, through a close association with Reg Revans, the founding father of action learning, and a visiting professor at the University of Ulster in the mid seventies, has long incorporated elements of action learning in its courses. Whilst it is not the purpose of this paper to argue the relative merits of various learning theories, inevitably the development of EHE across all faculties challenges not only theoretical perspectives on learning but current practice, staff understanding, teaching and assessment abilities. The process of competence development becomes an activity appropriate for student and staff alike, and has major implications for staff development.

The implications of the EHE initiative for all parties in the tripartite alliance are significant. The shift from producer led to increasingly customer sensitive courses is considerable. Equally the involvement of students, employers, and staff in a genuine developmental partnership is challenging, and requires much adaptation by all parties. Mintzberg and Quinn (1991, p 12) recently noted:

“Whether we realise it or not, our behaviour is guided by the systems of ideas that we have internalised over the years. Much can be learned by bringing these out into the open, examining them more carefully, and comparing them with alternative ways to view the world – including ones based on systematic study (that is, research).”

If in developing enterprising students we can systematically explore, as Mintzberg suggests, then the impact of the EHE initiative will remain embodied in the values of the University long after its five year life span.

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