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The case of VPL and industry focused programmes in Cork Institute of Technology (CIT)

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Target groups: Higher Education Institutions, Education and training providers, Enterprise, Industry partners

Abstract:

As organisations focus on economic indicators and return on investment their approaches to learning and development opportunities are transformed. In a challenging, competitive climate there is a need to ensure that the long and short term benefits are maximised. This masterclass describes the experience and issues raised for Cork Institute of Technology, a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Ireland in implementing programmes developed in partnership with industry which are mutually beneficial and maintain academic standards. It also addresses the enablers, challenges and barriers in customised course development.

Learning objectives:

- An insight into how to start the process and how to respond as a HEI to industry requirements within academic programmes incorporating VPL
- Striking the balance between specific current and future workplace skills and competency requirements and the broader purpose of Higher Education.
- A practical approach to collaborative programme design, development and delivery (informed by the work of the REAP collaborative project)
- Widening the participation rate within Higher Education (Enhancing the relevance and currency of Higher Education)
- Maximising resources in terms of labour and facilities
- Challenges, enablers and benefits of HEI and industry engagements from CIT perspective

Introduction:

While engagement is often presented as a third mission of universities, encompassing the full range of external interactions with enterprises, individuals and communities, separate and distinct from the first two missions of teaching and research, it is only effective if it is closely interlinked with them. Vorley and Nelles (2008) describe the third mission as a ‘thread that has the capacity to weave together teaching and research, while assuming a more economic and societal focus’. Viewed in this way, engagement is not separate from education and research, but rather a new lens through which to view teaching and learning and research activities. Goddard clearly articulates the dangers associated with disjointed approaches.

‘Insofar as external engagement is taking place, the academic heartland is protected by specialist units dealing with technology transfer and continuing education.

However the external engagement agenda... requires institutional responses, co-ordination and transversal mechanisms.’ (Goddard 2005: 30).

In the past number of years there have been changes in approach at a national and international level as to how programs are devised, delivered and supported. There has been a significant shift in thinking on what learning is valued, coupled with where and how learning can be achieved. There is also an increased emphasis on professionalism within the enterprise domain and the need for on-going support for the acquisition of skills and competencies to ensure growth and sustainability within a changing and competitive global marketplace.

There has been a ‘paradigm shift in higher education, one from a focus on teaching, to a focus on learning’ (Barr & Tagg 1995). There is a tension between the traditional academic approach and the newer demands of students to have an understanding of the application of their learning rather than knowledge alone. There is increasingly a demand for student-centred programmes which focus on developing the learners rather than solely delivering education and assessment.

In 2011, the Irish national strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) identified ‘higher education as a mechanism to make Ireland a country recognized for innovation, competitive enterprise and continued academic excellence.’ Several areas were outlined which would require change and attention including;

- Engagement with the community
- Changes in teaching and learning
- Assessment
- Quality assurance systems

As a result of this report there is increased focus on educational institutions and how they need to change in terms of ‘autonomy, collaboration, to become outward facing and fully accountable for quality and efficiency outcomes. ‘This demand was in part addressed through the Strategic Innovation Funding provided by the Higher Education Authority to transform higher education in Ireland.

The economic climate in Ireland has had an influence on how industries and organisations are engaging with training and development in terms of planning for the future and having a workforce capable of responding to market changes. Training and development units within companies are more conscious of spending budgets on activities which will have a relevance to the employee but also the organisation and organisational development goals.

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland invested significant funding in the restructuring of higher education in Ireland in an attempt to make it more responsive to the economic changes and more dynamic in its educational offerings going forward. One such funded project was the Roadmap for Employer Academic Partnerships (REAP) which built on the work of the Education in Employment (EIE) project which collectively focused on the workplace as a centre for learning, the aligning of industry and higher education in the creation of more relevant and meaningful programmes.

Research conducted and reviewed by the Irish national consortiums of the Education in Employment (EIE) and Roadmap for Employer Academic Partnerships (REAP) project

included the perspectives of eleven Irish Higher Education institutions and their collaborations with industry.

The findings of the consortium centred on the relationship which should exist within a work-based learning arrangement. As graphically demonstrated in the diagram the Higher Education Institution, employer and employee all have an equal part to play in successful work-based learning engagements (Linehan, 2008). It is the inclusion of the requirements or motivations of each of the actors that lead to positive results as opposed to it being dominated by one.

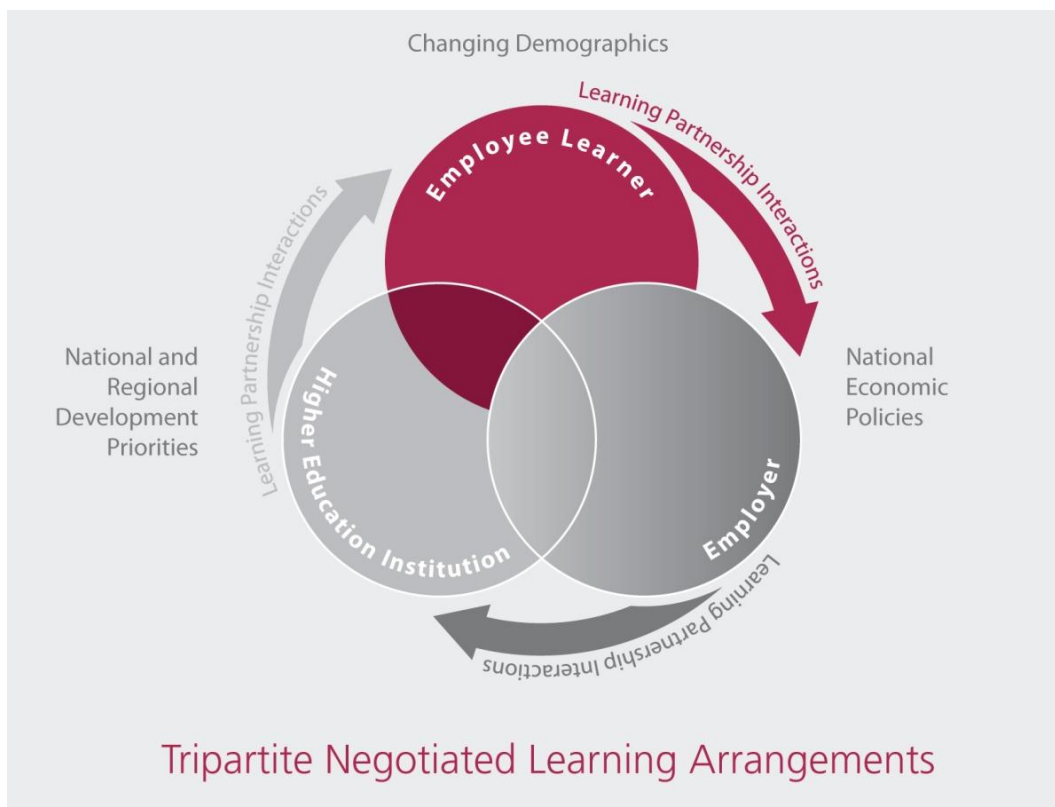


Figure 1 Tripartite learning arrangement Customised Learning Development; An Exploration of Practice

In a review of practice in Customised Learning developments to meet specific industry needs good practice guidelines were developed from an analysis of a number of different practice arrangements for the general stages in customised course development (Sheridan and Murphy, 2012). These stages which are outlined below are not indicative of a rigid process but provide a good general approach which may be useful to those interested in course development in a response to workplace needs.

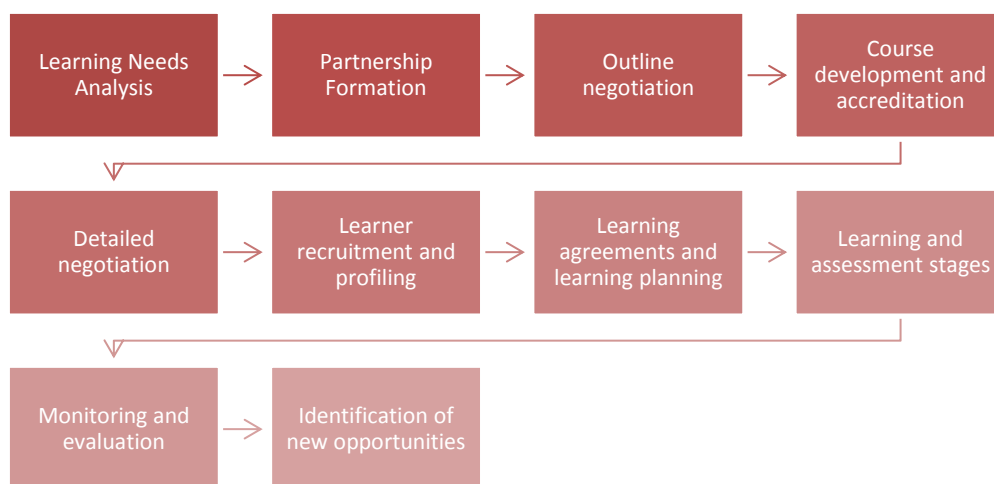


Figure 2. Main Steps in Customised Course Development

The report also identified the following enablers for customised learning development programmes with industry;

- Existing relationship and good mutual understanding between the higher education institution and the company.
- Clear points of contact and commitment to the vision and the process from both sides
- Clear decision structures in each organisation with regard to the development of a customised programme so that changes are clearly and easily implemented
- Identifiable learning need to motivate both in developing an appropriate solution.
- Flexible approaches to learning and assessment
- Availability of funding
- Existing exemplars which show the potential of HEI employer engagements

These factors as outlined above have informed the practice of CIT in its engagements with Industry. In terms of RPL / VPL, RPL policy and practice has existed within CIT since 1999 and applies to all courses in all disciplines and at all levels of the framework. In CIT, RPL can be used for entry, advanced entry, module exemption and full academic award based on prior informal and non-formal learning. As Institutes of Technology place significant emphasis on the development of programmes closely aligned to the needs of the workplace and with enterprise partners, the integration of workplace competences within higher education is very much within their remit.

Increased negotiation with workplaces to keep pace with enterprise changes and challenges which will have an impact on graduate skill requirements in the future is also a factor of which HEIs have to be mindful, however the challenge is in striking the balance between education and industry priorities. These priorities can be achieved through strategic partnerships to develop customised learning pathways that are sensitive both to the learner profile and existing skill set and are informed by the unfolding organisational needs.

This masterclass relates to how Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) has been responding to these challenges. CIT is a publicly funded higher education provider. It is the largest provider of the network of thirteen Institutes of Technology. The Institute makes its own awards at undergraduate and taught Masters level, under Delegated Authority from Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).

CIT currently has in the region of 15,000 registered students; approximately 7,000 are registered full-time on third-level programmes, and the remaining part-time students. CIT's education, research and training provision spans a wide variety of disciplines, from business and humanities through engineering and science to music, drama, art & design and nautical studies.

To demonstrate the variation in programme development the experiences of Cork Institute of Technology will be discussed in the context of two different workplace engagements incorporating the validation of prior learning in a response to an industry need whilst maintaining academic standards.

In the cloud

In the reports by the Irish Expert Group on Future Skill Needs (EGFSN) since 2008 the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) sector is predicted to continue to grow, develop and provide employment into the foreseeable future in Ireland. In conjunction with this growth, there is also an expansion of scope of skill set required by graduates and employees. In terms of graduate development, education and training institutions are altering the content of their programmes to cater for these new skill needs. However research predicts a continuing gap between the available graduates and the recruitment needs. There is also a significant cohort already working in the industry with an extensive level of workplace experience and informal and non-formal learning either in, or related to, the emerging areas. In addition, there are industries with extremely competent workforces with a strong non formal training ethos but academic qualifications have become the tender for measuring the professionalism of a workforce. This case study relates to an approach by a Higher Education Institution in working with employers to respond to industry needs building on existing learning towards academic validation.

In 2011, Cork Institute of Technology launched two online programmes, the BSc and MSc in Cloud Computing. These customised programmes were developed in close consultation with employer organisations in a response to the growing need for skills in cloud and associated technologies. The consultative development process integrated the emerging workplace competences, informal and non-formal learning into the content and learning outcomes of the programme. Participation in the programme was also facilitated through advanced entry via a recognition of prior learning (RPL) route for those with appropriate prior learning but without the prerequisite formal academic qualifications.

The partnership for these programmes extends to the delivery of elements of the programmes by industry subject matter experts as appropriate. To date, 270 individuals have participated in the programmes from countries such as Ireland, Russia, United States, Egypt and India. In addition, to widen participation in these programmes, the institute in collaboration with workplace partners continues to identify pathways for workplace learners to gain access by building on their appropriate work place learning, which incorporates informal and non-formal learning.

One additional development in this arena was the annual funding of programmes since 2012 under the ICT skills conversion courses government funded initiatives as a response to job creation. The programmes are designed to address future skill requirements by employer organisations in the ICT sector. Due to the economic situation in Ireland there are graduates with high levels of skill in a variety of disciplines but not necessarily in Information

Technology. The qualification attainment demonstrates the academic aptitude of the individual. In terms of outcomes of this engagement the result has been that 100% of graduates secured employment, predominantly within companies involved in the initial BSc/MSc engagement.

To provide an insight into the diversity of engagements the second case study relates to the **Irish Naval Service (INS)**.

The engagement between CIT and Irish Naval Service began over twenty years ago. In relation to workforce development the Naval service has a strong tradition of non-formal learning in the workplace. In terms of validation, this learning has traditionally been exclusively for the purposes of workforce and rank progression and had no academic credit attributed to it.

In 2008, the Irish Naval Service realised that if they were to become the most professional Naval service in the world by 2015 they needed to re-examine their approach to training and development. In particular, there was a need to link the level of their training to a level on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications to facilitate academic progression. It was also desirable for personnel to have qualifications which were recognised outside of the defence forces.

In terms of workplace development and the workplace as a centre for learning, in 2008 CIT and the Irish Naval Service (INS) collaborated on the inclusion of a stream within the BSc (hons) in Nautical Science specifically for INS personnel. The content of the four modules integrated and built upon the pre-existing non formal training from the workplace.

In addition, as the INS personnel are active in the workplace whilst completing the course then a workplace mentor network was created to support the learner in completing the modules. This mentor network exists where ever the employee is stationed either on land or at sea. The assessment is jointly conducted by workplace senior officers and academic staff which further demonstrates the level of collaboration in this engagement.

As the programme is validated by CIT then it is subject to the institute's academic quality standards policy which underpins all academic programmes. The programme successfully created further employment and study options to participants and built on their prior and developing workplace learning. The impact for the Irish Naval Service was that it restructured their approach to all training and development in terms of aligning to the national framework of qualifications and in courses linked to staff progression which were traditionally designed and delivered solely by the workplace. It also opened up new possibilities in terms of course development from undergraduate to professional doctorate studies.

Benefits, challenges and barriers

As identified in the report 'Customised Learning Development; An Exploration of Practice (Sheridan and Murphy, 2012), the benefits of engaging in this way can be divided into the benefits for the HEI partner which include the following

- Increased student numbers and the associated income stream
- Increased diversity of learners
- Organisational learning and staff development
- Enhanced relevance and currency of the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes

- Other opportunities for engagements and access to expertise and resources

These benefits will only be realised if there are also benefits to the Industry partner such as the following;

- Improved employee knowledge, skills and competence
- Enhanced employee satisfaction and improved retention
- Profile as a learning organisation
- Improved productivity and work practices
- Other opportunities for engagements and access to expertise and resources

These engagements are not without their challenges for CIT such as resourcing and the academic calendar. Flexible initiatives can be troublesome as they can lie outside of individual's time tables and also the moratorium on recruitment in the public service prevents the hiring of new academics to deliver the workplace programmes. In terms of these engagements the issue to appointing adjunct faculty members if the expertise resides in the enterprise rather than the HEI can also be problematic. The major challenge is in the fixed semesterisation timetable which seldom coincides with when industry is interested in engaging so a delay in initial rollout can happen which can be frustrating for the industry partner.

- In general, other barriers as identified in the Customised Learning Development report include; Unrealistic expectation of time, effort, cost involved
- Cultural conflicts including skill vs. education dilemma
- Lack of awareness of HEI capability and capacity
- Inaccurate learning needs analysis , over-projection by company of the level of need
- Lack of infrastructure/ systems within the institution for registration and invoicing of non-standard students
- Lack of infrastructure at college level for costing/pricing
- Challenges associated with resourcing new initiatives
- Rigidity of HEI contracts and the lack of clear recognition or reward for HEI staff
- Inflexibility of processes in relation to non-standard students and the place and pace of the learning and assessment processes;
- Relevance and currency of HEI course content and lack of recognition of learning gained outside of HEI.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the inclusion of work place requirements in terms of the validation of prior learning presents opportunities for Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and employers. The challenge is in identifying, designing and managing the engagement to satisfy the needs of the employer, employee and HEI.

Acknowledgements

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