

Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration

Consultation Response : April 2003

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Ufi welcomes the Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration and the opportunity to comment on the links between business and the universities in the UK. As Ufi was established specifically with the remit of supporting skills development for industry, it recognises the importance of initiating and fostering relationships with business and developing an increased understanding of how educational institutions can improve their delivery to meet the needs of business. Although Ufi is not a higher education (HE) institution, it is engaged in a number of activities, both in collaboration with the HE sector and independently with business, that it believes could usefully inform future behaviours in the HE sector as it develops its links with business.

Background

Ufi Ltd, which operates the **learndirect** network and services, is the largest government supported e-learning organisation in the world. It was established in 1998 by the current Government to take forward the concept of a 'university for industry'. **learndirect**'s unique selling proposition is that it offers 'any time, any place, any pace learning' for individual adults and businesses, both large corporates and small and medium enterprises with over **900** different learning packages delivered and supported on-line. The learner can access his/her learning in one of over **2,000** different nationwide learning venues, sited in a wide range of 'lifestyle' locations as well as from home or the workplace via the Internet. Ufi Ltd works collaboratively with over **600** partners including the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), the funding bodies (LSC, ELWa and DEL), Small Business Service (SBS), Confederation of British Industry (CBI), TUC, further education colleges (FECs), private training providers, voluntary and community sector organisations and higher education institutions (HEIs) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to deliver **learndirect**, both virtually and through its network of learning venues.

Ufi's mission¹ is to work with partners to boost people's employability, and organisations' productivity and competitiveness by:

- ◆ *Inspiring existing learners to develop their skills further*
- ◆ *Winning over new and excluded learners*
- ◆ *Transforming the accessibility of learning in everyday life and work.*

In addition, Ufi delivers a government funded national advice line for learning via its **learndirect 0800 100 900** number providing impartial information, advice and guidance to callers on more than 500,000 courses nationally. Since the service began in February 1998, the advice line has handled four million enquiries and the web site six million.

¹ Transforming Learning: Changing Lives, Ufi Limited Strategic Plan 2002-2005

Working with Higher Education to meet the needs of Business

Ufi understands that the HE sector needs to change if the UK is to remain in an internationally competitive position and has noted the particular emphasis that the White Paper places on widening and increasing participation, and that the delivery of an HE education to this wider audience will be encouraged primarily through Foundation Degrees. Ufi is already responding to this in collaboration with HEFCE, HEIs, learners and business through the delivery of Foundation Degrees.

Ufi has developed what it believes is a unique offer based on a three way relationship comprising Ufi, an HE institution and an individual learner based in the workplace. This offer, known as *learning through work* (LtW), provides an individual learner with the opportunity to articulate his/her learning needs negotiated in conjunction with both the employer and the HE institution to formulate a path of study that meets both employer's and employee's needs and leads to an HE level qualification. Ufi believes the LtW offer provides an interesting model for the HE sector and business to consider as part of their discussion about future ways of working.

What makes learndirect - *learning through work* effective?

Ufi and its HE partners has developed the **learndirect - *learning through work*** (LtW) scheme, which offers a range of HE continuing development awards from undergraduate to doctorate level.

The scheme is based on the design and completion of an on-line learning contract enabling learners (individuals and groups) to address their developmental needs in the context of their work. Central to the scheme is the recognition that much relevant learning takes place through the process of work itself; through working individually and in teams on projects, products, services and developments, and through advances in techniques, research and practice. LtW is not a course but rather a framework for planning and undertaking learning.

The focus of each individual learner's programme and resulting qualification is negotiated with and agreed by the HEI – in some cases the award title itself can be negotiated on an individual basis. LtW may also be used to deliver programmes to groups (or cohorts) of learners. In these cases a large part of the programme is designed for the sponsoring organisation (usually an employer) by the HEI.

LtW is designed for:

- individuals in work wishing to gain a university qualification, top up an existing qualification or gain HE level credit;
- business or occupationally-based groups working in line with the sponsoring organisation's aims. The overall programme is agreed with the organisation but individuals customise a significant element of their learning themselves, to reflect their individual aspirations and working contexts.

Participants do not necessarily need 'traditional' qualifications - such as A levels - to be eligible for LtW. Every HEI has its own entry requirements and will consider each applicant on their own merits.

There are currently nine institutions taking part in this scheme and further are planned this year.

Delivering Foundation Degrees

Ufi is currently developing its LtW offering to support the delivery of Foundation Degrees by working collaboratively with a small number of HEIs, initially.

The University of Derby uses LtW to support part of their Educare Foundation Degree and the Thames Valley University will be using it to deliver six Foundation Degrees including Hospitality, Music and Multimedia Technology and from September adding subjects including Credit Management and Applied Law.

Ufi is working actively with the University of Derby to refine the function within LtW to support the needs of Foundation Degree learners and tutors.

Working in partnership with Barclays University (bu)

One of the keys to meeting the needs of business lies in the supply side's capacity to both understand and respond flexibly. Last year, Ufi entered into a partnership with Barclays University (bu) to provide greater access to learning and skills development for Barclays Bank employees. By 14 October, the entire network of "bu Hubs" was established with 138 **learnirect** learning centres hosting "bu Hubs". Since then, there has been a considerable increase in usage with well over 2,000 Barclays staff visiting the centres and engaging in a range of learning opportunities.

This partnership, although not located within HE at the current time, demonstrates how working in this way through exploiting what both the supply and demand sides have to offer can be effective in supporting skills development for business. This has come about through the establishment of an open dialogue and the willingness of Ufi to find flexible solutions to meet the needs of Barclays as an employer. Ufi believes there is learning to be captured from a relationship such as this for the HE sector.

Ufi is now working with a significant number of large employers in a similar way to that illustrated by the Barclays example above.

Supporting Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

In addition to its work with large employers, Ufi is also working with the SME sector. Through the establishment of a unique learning centre network, called Premier Business Centres, Ufi is working hard to ensure that it makes a positive impact on the business performance of SMEs through direct engagement with business managers by people who understand the issues facing an SME.

What is a Premier Business Centre?

A Premier Business Centre is a provider of **learnirect** that has demonstrated through accreditation to the new Small Firms Enterprise Development Initiative (SFEDI) Standard the capability to relate to SMEs in their own world. Attainment of the Standard established their credibility in a difficult market and will enable them to develop ongoing relationships with businesses, address the needs of the business and make a positive impact on business performance through management and workforce development.

Developing a network of Premier Centres provides a focused and high quality route to the SME market that will, in time, help to establish **learnirect** as the primary source of workplace learning.

Summary

Ufi is pleased to respond to this consultation request and looks forward to playing an active part in supporting the development of the UK's HE capability to engage more effectively with business.

Ufi will continue to do this by:

- Working with **learnirect** learners to ensure that not only do they aspire to Higher Education but that learning is available to help them meet the entry criteria to enable them to realise this opportunity.
- Working with HEIs, businesses and learners to develop the support capability provided by the LtW offer to help deliver Foundation Degrees with HE partners.
- Extending Ufi's HE strategy in recognition of the value that higher level vocational qualifications will bring to the economy of the UK.

Through its network of learning centres and the ability to reach learners throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Ufi believes it can increasingly add value to the HE sector, particularly in its engagement with business and welcomes any future opportunity to discuss the role it can play.

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