



# **Innovative Practice in Work-based Learning: fresh produce supply chain management development in the UK**

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## **Background**

The UK fresh produce industry is both complex and diverse. It can be characterised as a highly fragmented industry but nevertheless with some significant players. There is an overriding trend towards supply chain concentration in the industry and high levels of competition, with multiple retailers seeking to deal with a reduced number of suppliers. For many years the industry has experienced problems recruiting the number and quality of staff required, with vacancies available throughout the supply chain; this is possibly related to the poor image the industry holds, particularly among graduates. This situation provided the impetus for the development of a work-based postgraduate qualification developed by a partnership of Harper Adams University College and Management Development Services (MDS Ltd), a consortium of UK-based fresh produce companies.

## **Government encouragement**

Investment in workforce development and adult skills is

increasingly seen as vital to the future economy of the UK and has increasingly become an area of interest for higher education institutions (HEIs) (Brennan & Little, 2006). 'Food 2030', a new Government food strategy that sets out what the food system should look like in 20 years' time, recognises that people in the food industry should 'become even more professional in business, innovation and management' (DEFRA, 2010, p.18). Connor (2005) believes that more mutually responsive and engaged business and higher education relations have to develop; a sentiment reflected by a strategy for engaging employers (HEFCE, 2006) and necessary if targets set by Leitch (2006) are to be met. The benefits to both employees and employers are investigated in Nixon (2008).

## **The need for action**

Several universities have accredited in-company training towards degrees and diplomas, and many have introduced schemes for the accreditation of prior learning and

experience. Others have started work-based learning developments to earn extra income (Connor, 2005; Nixon et al., 2006). But in order to get a much greater share of the workforce development market, Connor (2007) believes that HEIs will need to make significant improvements in their speed of responsiveness, delivery mechanisms, relevance of programmes to what is wanted by employers, and staff resources. King (2007), in reviewing evidence of employer demand for higher-level workforce development, found a mismatch between the compelling arguments for England to raise its game in terms of global competitiveness and the general lack of reliable statistical data to suggest that employers and validating HEIs were working to address higher level skill shortages.

### **An innovative work-based partnership**

It was within this context that MDS, a non-profit making recruitment and training organisation with approximately 26 member companies specialising in the fresh produce and horticultural supply chain and working in association with Harper Adams University College, planned to change the nature of graduate training. MDS was set up in 1986 and is a consortium of member companies who contribute towards the salary and training costs of trainees, as well as providing work placements. Members work towards a common goal of training graduates for the industry even though they may be competitors (MDS, 2009).

This qualification, a work-based Postgraduate Certificate (PgC) in Food and Fresh Produce Management, has been developed around an existing two-year training course. It comprises of four 5- to 6-month secondments within the member companies, interspersed with 27 days of high quality off-the-job training (Leighton, 2007).

### **Benefits to the trainees and MDS**

The Postgraduate Certificate:

- aids recruitment to MDS;
- adds rigour to the training programme;
- demonstrates commitment of MDS to lifelong learning;
- reinforces supply chain training imperatives;
- gives students the opportunity to gain a Master's degree with further study.

The trainees are employees of MDS and are salaried and looked after by a small dedicated team; this enables the member companies to hire the trainees' services for six months at a time without the attendant administration and personnel issues. The 10 trainees taken on every 6 months (20 per year), following an intensive selection process, benefit from:

- readily available coaching, mentoring and support;
- networking opportunities;

- experience of differing company cultures, roles and markets;
- opportunity for off-the-job reflection;
- assignments offering solutions to real company problems;
- gaining a formal, recognised, qualification.

## The training programme

The training programme is a partnership which requires flexibility, commitment and input from both sides. The aim is to ensure the trainee has the support needed to develop both personal and professional skills, while meeting the challenging demands of the member companies. Harper Adams independently audited the original training programme and student performance. Off-the-job training is provided by a number of independent training organisations who are also monitored by Harper Adams.

The trainees have the opportunity to bridge the gap between university and work via valuable workplace experiences. Learning is enhanced through the use of personal development planning, industry-based assignments and preparing a forward-looking industry outlook paper. The aim of the course is to enable trainees to:

- take on the responsibility of a manager in a business;
- improve their own performance and the performance of others;
- manage people appropriately;
- communicate effectively;
- understand and manage change.

## Review of progress

There are now approximately 40 students registered on the PgC course. The first cohort of trainees graduated in December 2009 and all have commenced full time careers (Fresh Produce Journal, 2009). The best synoptic paper produced by the graduates was published in the fresh produce industry's leading monthly journal (Bambridge, 2009). Both the number of secondments and applications for traineeships remain strong. A great deal of learning has been required by both partners to get the scheme running smoothly, including:

- the need for partners to commit and embed fully (Harper Adams University College was invited to join the MDS Board and MDS is represented on Harper Adams' Academic Board);
- planning operations in detail and clarifying responsibilities such as the appointment of link coordinators;
- ensuring top management commitment;
- frequent communication to ensure consistent expectations and that difficult issues are prevented from developing;
- regular staff development to support colleagues new to higher education;

- the need for a 'champion' in both partner organisations;
- development of new forms of assessment such as tutor observation;
- involving private sector tutors in developing the programme and in ongoing training and assessment;
- assessment design and linking theory with practice.

## Conclusions

Work-based learning will continue to be a Government priority in the UK, with funds being made available for employer engagement projects. The PgC course is an example of how learning can be embedded in the workplace in order to provide industry-related training and development while engaging with a HEI to everyone's mutual benefit. Changing employee demographics in the sector are widening the source of trainees, reflecting the influx of graduates from other countries into the UK in recent years. This model of work-based learning, whereby competitor companies have come together on a membership basis to address common difficulties, could be readily adapted to other sectors of the economy as well as accommodating companies outside the UK.

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