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National Human Resource Development in the United Kingdom

Monica Lee

The problem and the solution. The problem in talking about NHRD in the UK is that it is diverse and multifaceted, precluding complete coverage in the space available. This article first looks at key government initiatives and the roles of stakeholders before making some general points.

Keywords: United Kingdom, National HRD

This article looks at NHRD in the UK from two intertwined perspectives, namely initiatives to foster the development of the national workforce, alongside the impact these initiatives have on the UK conceptualisation of HRD. The development of HRD in the UK has been previously explored by Lee and Stead (1998) and will not be repeated here, other than to assert that, while based in idealism, it has been largely a political and economic process, and these remain important factors that are highlighted in this account of NHRD.

Government Initiatives

Over the last ten years, the government has concentrated on up-skilling the workforce and developing a focus on life-long learning through a variety of initiatives that together have had a major effect upon the provision and understanding of HRD in the UK. Though they are government-led, the majority of these initiatives have been consultative and are based upon a stakeholder view of HRD and the economy. The UK government wishes to foster competence across all sectors of the workforce, with associated quality control, through the creation of National Occupational Standards and Modern Apprenticeship Frameworks. These are managed by Sector Skills Councils

(SSCs). SSCs are independent, UK-wide organizations and are designed to give employers a stronger voice in the planning and delivery of learning and skills. The councils are largely employer-led, but also actively involve trade unions, professional bodies, and other stakeholders in the industrial or business sector. (See Table 1 at the end of this article for a list of useful websites regarding various stakeholders in UK NHRD.) All but 15% of sectors will be covered by the SSC in 2004.

The Learning and Skills Council is particularly linked to NHRD. It plans and funds all post-16 education other than the university sector, with a combined budget of £8 billion (2003/4), and each branch has representatives from employers, learning providers, and community groups working to provide local solutions to local needs. The LSC supports a system of Modern Apprenticeships with the plan to increase the number of entrants from 25% to 28% of people under 22 during the next three years. There are other government initiatives, but the core ones are National Vocational Qualifications, Investors in People, and quality control in HE (Higher Education). Each of these impacts the development of the workforce and the UK conceptualization of HRD.

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs)

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) oversees a comprehensive framework of vocational qualifications covering all occupations and industries. All stakeholders were represented on this and in the development of the competency approach, including the University Forum for HRD. The main focus of the QCA of importance here is to work with others to accredit and monitor qualifications in colleges and at work through the establishment of NVQ's. These provide outcome or practice-based portable qualifications for individuals and, as can be seen in Figure 1, are meant to

be equivalent to GCSE's (national exams taken by 15-year-olds); A Levels (national exams taken by 17-year-olds); Certificate; Diploma; and Masters qualifications, respectively.

Figure 1

A Framework for Qualifications in the UK.

Framework for Higher Education Qualifications		National Qualifications Framework(revised)					National Qualifications Framework (existing)
D	(Doctoral) Doctorates	8		Vocational Dips			5 Higher Levels
M	(Masters) Masters degrees, Postgraduate certificates & diplomas	7	Key skills	Vocational Certs & Dips		[NVQ 5]	
H	(Honours) Bachelors degrees, Graduate certificates & diplomas	6		Vocational Certs & Dips			4 Higher Levels
I	(Intermediate) Diplomas of HE & FE, Foundation degrees, Higher National Diplomas	5	Key skills	Vocational Certs & Dips		[NVQ 4]	
C	(Certificate) Certificates of Higher Education	4		Vocational Certs & Dips			
		3	Key skills	Vocational Certs & Dips	A Levels	NVQ 3	3 Advanced

	2	Key skills	Vocational Certs & Dips	GCSE (Grades A* - C)	NVQ 2	2 Intermediate
	1	Key/ Basic skills	Vocational Certs & Dips	GCSE (Grades D - G)	NVQ 1	1 Foundation
	Entry	Basic skills	Certificates of achievement			Entry

This represents a major upheaval of the traditional ex-cathedra approach to learning and was hotly debated during its inception. Not only was there a revolution in understanding of what learning might be, but there was hot debate about what might be seen as competent behavior at different levels and in different sectors, about how that may be measured and who should measure it. Until then, universities and other educational bodies were the privileged few able to offer qualifications and thus recoup fees. The system of competencies offered a flexible approach in which individuals could earn part or full qualifications based upon the jobs they were already doing and offered by a wide competitive range of appropriately accredited people and bodies. This approach has been criticized for generic problems associated with its conceptualization of standardization as well as for its approach to learning, in which the focus is seen to be on assessment rather than development, and such a strong focus on practice is seen to devalue theory and reflection and so prevent the full learning cycle (Canning, 1990; Lee, 1996; Stewart & Hamlin, 1992). Despite its criticisms, this initiative represents a major attempt by all stakeholders at social engineering and, in itself, demonstrates the strategic and political role of HRD reform in practice on a grand scale.

Investors in People (IIP)

Investors in People was established in 1993 and had nearly 35,000 organizations registered at the end of 2003, including 45% of organizations employing more than 50 people, and a £30m cash injection to encourage smaller firms to engage in the initiative. All areas of the organization are examined, through questionnaires and interviews with employees and managers, and the award is achieved if good practice and a committed approach to the development of the workforce can be evidenced, in other words, if HRD is clearly active, integrated, and aligned to organizational strategy.

The award badges the organization as a good employer and attracts staff and customers. It has proved very popular and has raised the profile of HRD nationally and within the organization. Spilsbury, Atkinson, Hillage, and Meager (1994) found that 84% of firms committed to the IIP standard measured the effectiveness of training, compared with 63% of those not participating in IIP. HRD is increasingly being seen as a vital and strategic area of the business—an asset rather than a cost.

University Rating System

The University Rating System initiative is managed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and is designed to standardize provision and qualifications through the rating of research and teaching in the university sector. All providers of higher education are rated by subject-based nationally appointed panels of peers for quality of research and teaching on separate cycles of about four years each. Individuals are scored separately, and these are combined to give subject and discipline area ratings. HR is rated as a subset of management. Funding for universities is based upon student numbers and, increasingly, upon the ratings scored. Both sets of results are

published, and further funding, as well as staff and students (overseas as well as UK) are attracted to the high prestige subject providers. Whether or not one believes in the appropriateness of such ratings, they have a strong effect upon the shape of HR provision and how it is conceptualized. The power of the panel is profound, and there are no pre-existing criteria by which to judge whether a paper in one journal is better than a paper in another, and whether one topic or aspect of research is more germane than another.

In summary, the government has established a far-reaching agenda of workforce development establishing nation-wide, multi-stakeholder quality control systems linked to competency across the work force, HR in organizations, and research and teaching in higher education institutions. Each of these impacts upon the practice and conceptualization of HRD, and together they represent a grand-scale HR intervention that moulds the way in which the workforce is developed through all strata of education and in the workplace. This has a profound effect upon the providers of such development, and the nature of their provision, which in turn influences the UK conceptualization of HRD.

The Providers

The providers of HRD include the professions, universities, further education, companies and business, and individual trainers and developers.

Professions

Each profession has played a part in establishing the government's approach to developing the workforce. The Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) will be focussed on here, both as an example of how the profession has worked with the initiatives, but also because, in training the next generation of trainers, the

outcomes of the CIPD deliberations have a profound and long-term effect upon the future form of NHRD. The CIPD professional qualifications are based on the CIPD's own professional standards that adopt a wider view of what is encompassed by HRD than do the training and development NVQ's. Therefore, they incorporate elements of the management NVQ's, as well as focusing upon theory and reflection. The CIPD is also an awarding body for NVQs, and completion of an NVQ combined with the appropriate continuous professional development can lead to various levels of membership of the Institute.

Universities

These initiatives are changing the nature of university provision. The debates about theory and practice and alternative forms of assessment existed in universities, such as Lancaster, for about 15 years before the government-driven initiatives described above, and indeed staff from these universities informed and fostered those changes, but the practical outcomes of these initiatives have opened up applied areas of study. There is now an increasing awareness of forms of provision and assessment that are alternatives to the traditional theory-based and exam-assessed content, particularly for post-experience students and applied areas such as HRD. Both because of a belief in alternative forms of learning and in order to compete with professional and vocational qualifications, many HR departments in universities have explored the possibility of integrated provision (Stead & Lee, 1996)—indeed, the UFHRD was formed around the search for a match between university and professional qualifications and NVQ's.

Similarly, the way in which university funding follows quality in research and teaching, as described above, has implications for the whole workforce and the future

profile of NHRD. If new fields, such as HR, can demonstrate quality, then they can also attract funding. If taught at all at universities, HRD used to be understood as a relatively unimportant sub-section of management studies. It is now, increasingly, being seen as an area of study that goes far beyond the training function of the large bureaucracy to encompass development and change within the whole organization, and to overlapping/overarching areas, such as strategy, management learning, knowledge management, and ICT, as well as alternative organizational forms, such as small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), knowledge-based organizations, dispersed organizations, and multi-organizational networks. Similarly, the study of HRD in the UK is now characterized by a wide variety of methodological, philosophical, and paradigmatic approaches and influences, from critical studies through complexity to theatre and story telling. Each of these largely research-led developments strengthens the field as a legitimate academic area of enquiry while also feeding back into, and influencing, NHRD.

Further Education

Further Education colleges are strongly influenced by the Learning and Skills Council and do not have awarding powers of their own, thus their qualifications are awarded by external bodies, such as City and Guilds (C&G). C&G is the leading vocational awarding body in the UK, awarding almost 50% of all NVQs. Staff and curricula in further education are geared towards meeting standardized requirements. They are also very used to offering non-qualification courses to post-experience people, so the government-backed initiatives have not affected them in the same way as universities. They have, however, been affected both by the widening of competition caused by the increase in providers accredited to offer NVQ's and professional

qualifications and also by the increase in participation caused by the uptake of these qualifications at the lower levels.

Companies and Business

Many of the UK's NHRD's efforts are directed towards organizations and the development of the workforce through the workplace. This principle is core to NVQ's and Modern Apprenticeships and is addressed directly through the IIP Awards that have placed the HRD function firmly on the agenda of large organizations. The uptake of other qualifications within these organizations is more varied and the demand for company-specific programs cuts across the idealism of nationwide standards.

Perceptions of what constitutes skill vary across organizations (Thursfield, 2001), and new forms of organization carry implications for the changing skills needed by the people who work in them (Watkins & Drury, 1999) and the forms of training provided (Kelleher, 1996). Employers have found the need to reinforce company-specific areas of learning and, as with the CIPD, have adopted what they see as the most useful elements from the whole range of provisions available, including company-specific qualifications and non-qualification development. Those wishing to offer higher education qualifications have to do so in partnership with a university. Many, however, operate on a mixture of in-house and out-sourced provisions. The latter is often company sponsored or employees are supported in their own development through benefits such as fees paid or time off work.

The conceptualization and provision of development in less traditional organizations is complex. Approximately 94% of UK businesses employ fewer than 10 people and are not large enough to support an HR function, and the HR needs of small

businesses are very different from those of large businesses. The IIP model of HRD requirements does not easily meet the requirements of SMEs (Westhead & Storey, 1996). The Federation of Small Businesses found that training was a major problem for small businesses. Only 19% were satisfied with their training, and 44% of small businesses had no training. Time constraints (26%) and cost (18%) were the factors most inhibiting to the uptake of training. A further 14% cited the lack of relevant training available locally. It is these, and the unemployed, that the government is particularly attempting to target in its desire to up-skill the workforce through the provision of easily accessible and portable practice-based qualifications. Standardized vocational and professional qualifications are of use to the increasingly mobile UK workforce; however, they have little to offer to non-mobile sectors of the workforce and the traditional SME.

Individual Trainers and Developers

The UK has a huge mobile group of trainers and developers, working individually or in small groups of associates. Many have vocational and professional accreditation, or are seeking it, and also seek (or hold) traditional qualifications. Integrated qualification courses are particularly attractive to these stakeholders, and it is their custom that many institutes of higher education seek when considering course design. The majority of such trainers and developers also have, or seek, qualifications necessary to be able to offer courses of qualification to others through accrediting bodies. These people also provide non-qualification development to large and small organizations, operating as flexible portfolio workers and weaving between the other stakeholders.

Associated Issues

Associated issues, other than the range or qualifications providers, are discussed in this section.

The Power of the Individual

Individual recipients of the HR provision, whether employed, self employed, or unemployed, form the final power block. The aim of each of the other stakeholders is to influence these people--to encourage them to obtain skills and thereby improve the UK economy, or, more directly, to engage in the HR provision (whether qualification or not) and so improve the economy of the providers. Self-development is of increasing importance, both for keeping abreast with changes in the workplace (particularly for those who have periods of absence from the workplace) and for enhancing and developing one's profile and, thus, employability. Some organizations are reluctant to foster portable qualifications, particularly in areas of shortage, such as ICT, in the belief that, as soon as an individual is fully trained, he or she will be poached by other organizations. Others profit from this and have a policy of buying talent at the appropriate level and accepting a high turnover of staff. Many organizations, however, see the cost of turnover as something to be minimized, where possible, and are, therefore, seeking ways of retaining staff. Bowing to the power that the skilled individual wields, these organizations are beginning to appreciate that benefits, such as a good developmental package and flexible working, can help attract and retain superior employees. Individuals are wielding a similar effect upon the providers of development. They are looking for flexible, convenient, and relevant provision, and the providers are adapting to this.

Developing the Untouched: Alternative Forms of Provision

This is also affecting the traditional SME and the unemployed, key foci of government initiatives. Local standardized provision can be limited, and there are many rural communities in the UK (dominated by SME's and the unemployed) that do not have access to local provision. These factors are encouraging experimentation with alternative forms of provision. The Open University has, for a long while, pioneered the use of distance learning through television programs backed by regular face-to-face tutorials to award academic qualifications. Similarly, the National Open College Network has provided a wide range of outsourced non-qualification and qualification programs, and there are now an increasing number of providers offering distance learning and e-learning and an upsurge of research into internet-based tools for learning. Some, such as the Interactive University, are government supported. Most of the e-learning provision requires computer literacy; however, interactive television-based learning is more accessible to these disadvantaged groups. Integrated and interactive learning through a special television channel is being pioneered by the Professional Development Channel with the intention of providing access to people in the comfort of their own homes and offering CPD, as well as qualification and non-qualification provision.

Internationalism

The aging workforce and advances in technology are encouraging greater mobility, flexibility, and work opportunities for those who have the appropriate skills (Coyne, Coyne, & Lee, 2003). As mobility increases, so are national boundaries being eroded. Multinationals, networks of organizations, and outsourcing, among others, each encourages a review of the conceptualization and practice of HR. Technology now

allows an organization to have employees from across the world work as if they were in the same building. The organization, the individuals, and the activities they undertake can be based anywhere and located separately. Similarly, one individual at any time can be working for several organizations spread across the world. Where are the national boundaries in this?

Individuals, voting with their feet (and fees) from across the world, will seek those qualifications and forms of development that support their internationally derived needs. They might never even visit the country in which they are working, but they will have emigrated to it economically while working or training there. This presents enormous tax and employment issues and indicates that a conception of HR as restricted to training and development and unaffected by such things as national economic or social policy is limited and misleading. The diversity that characterizes HR in the UK is an advantage here, but the flexibility of UK provision needs to be extended and new technologies embraced to make learning available and relevant to markets outside the UK, as well as within it. Similarly, UK providers need to accept the challenge of developing vocational, professional, and academic courses that adequately prepare UK trainers and developers to work internationally.

These points lead to the question of what is meant by working internationally and by internationally based needs. In 1994 the European Council of Ministers decided to adopt measures to establish a common framework of objectives for community action. This has influenced a wide range of Europe-wide initiatives, including EURO-call and EHRD and EURESFORM. These are Europe-wide networks sharing knowledge and expertise, the latter emerged from UFHRD and also oversees international placements of

staff and students and offers a European Professional certificate. Since the Bologna Agreement, in which the EU nations agreed to move towards qualification structures similar to those of the UK, there is an increasing drive to establish comparability of standards and qualifications across Europe.

In Summary

This article has described some of the major influences upon national HRD in the UK at present—these are complex and varied and affect practice and provision. The move in the UK has been towards standardization that inevitably risks developing a unitary and restricted approach, and one of the challenges is to balance this with national difference and expanding aspirations. This balance is being achieved through the government's determination to support less traditional aspects of provision and accessing traditionally difficult-to-reach recipients. A further challenge will be to meet the needs of an aging population alongside the breakdown of national barriers as technology and organizational structures evolve. This paper has also shown that, despite increasing standardization, the scope of HRD as a subject has changed dramatically over the last few years, and in line with the NHRD focus upon influencing the workforce through workplace development, many would now see it contributing to core aspects of the study (and practice) of organizations and management. In the UK at least, many now also conceive of HRD as contributing to, and being influenced by, such diverse things as national politics, economics, and philosophy.

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Table 1

List of Useful Websites Related to NHRD in the United Kingdom

Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) www.cipd.co.uk
City and Guilds (C&G) www.city-and-guilds.co.uk
EURESFORM www.ufhrd.com
EURO-call and EHRD www.ehrd-portal.org
European Framework www.naric.org.uk/faqs.asp
Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) http://www.fsb.org.uk/
Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) www.hefce.ac.uk
Interactive University www.interactiveuniversity.net
Investors in People (IIP) www.iipuk.co.uk
Learning and Skills Council (LSC) www.lsc.gov.uk
Modern Apprenticeships (MA) www.uknlp.org.uk/QUAL_DATABASE/MA
National Open College Network www.nocn.org.uk/
National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) www.dfes.gov.uk/nvq/
Open University www.ou.ac.uk
Professional Development Channel www.professionaldevelopment.tv
Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) www.ssda.org.uk
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) www.qca.org.uk

UK Qualifications Framework www.qca.org.uk

University Forum for HRD (UFHRD) www.ufhrd.com