Thinking critically
Higher skills for better public services

How a work-based learning programme from the University of Chester is helping the Pension, Disability and Carers Service
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Foreword

Many people formed their views of universities as undergraduates and often don’t know about changes in higher education since they graduated.

Increasingly, courses are being developed with employers that can be delivered at work, with higher education-level credit for what is learned on the job.

The Professionalism in Decision-Making and Appeals programme for disability benefit decision makers is a good example. Developed by the University of Chester with the Pension, Disability and Carers Service (an agency of the Department for Work and Pensions), it is still relatively young. But it has already started to change the organisation’s culture, helping us provide a better service to our customers and increasing job satisfaction among our employees.

We employ 1,300 staff who make decisions on benefit entitlement that affect the lives of many people. There is a parallel between their role and others in public services that require high levels of considerative skill. The professionalism of those employees has a major impact on how those services are perceived by those who use them.

A university programme was important to us because we wanted to improve the cognitive ability of our decision-making community, not just their practical and technical knowledge. And it is working well because our partnership with the University of Chester has produced a programme that captures key elements of our business and helps develop those critical thinking skills. People can progress as they grow in experience and expertise, recognising their abilities to undertake more demanding work.

I am sure other employers – particularly in the public sector – will find the lessons from this research summary of value in developing and planning their own partnerships and programmes with higher education.

Terry Moran CB
Chief Executive
Pension, Disability and Carers Service
Department for Work and Pensions
Introduction

Universities are increasingly working to develop higher education (HE) programmes with public and private sector employers. So, when the Pension, Disability and Carers Service (PDCS) wanted to enhance the professional skills of those who decide on key allowances, it chose the University of Chester to help.

PDCS wanted a programme that developed the critical thinking skills of its staff and used their existing technical expertise and knowledge to the full.

The university created a flexible programme, delivered in the workplace, where students gain credit for what they know, what they learn on the course and how they apply it in practice to improve their performance. The result has been better customer service and improved job satisfaction.

This summary is based on research by: Dr David Perrin and Pippa Weston from the University of Chester; Pauline Thompson MBE, Head of Professionalism in Decision-Making and Appeals at PDCS; and Pandy Brodie, who works both at the university and as an academic associate at PDCS.
What is negotiated work-based learning?

Since the 1980s, universities and other higher education institutions have been developing courses that combine traditional academic learning with on-the-job training.

Most universities now offer such programmes, which have common elements:

- learning often takes place in the workplace
- participants are encouraged to think critically about how they do things and how they might do things differently (a process known as ‘critical reflection’)
- the courses are attractive to those with little higher education experience
- learners and employers negotiate the right mix of modules to suit them
- academic credit is given for what is learned at work and what is applied in the workplace
- previous learning is properly accredited.

The Government has been particularly keen to encourage universities to engage with employers following major reviews in this area including the report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE) in 1997¹, the Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration in 2003² and the Leitch review of skills in 2006³.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), through its employer engagement programme, is supporting many universities and colleges such as the University of Chester in building their capacity to work with public, private and charity and not-for-profit organisations to develop the skills of their employees.

Work-based learning at Chester

The University of Chester was founded in 1839 and is located on two campuses at Chester and Warrington. It has 14,000 students. In the late 1980s, Chester was one of the pioneers of work-based learning in HE. From 1998 onwards, it has validated a framework of study known as Work-Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS), intended to allow students to gain academic credit for what they learn at work and to integrate relevant taught modules into their courses.
Students can gain accreditation for short awards, bachelors and masters degrees. The flexibility of the framework allows them or their employers to design a mix of studies that suit their needs and capabilities. They can even negotiate a name for their award to reflect their key professional skills and knowledge.

**Why did PDCS choose the University of Chester?**

PDCS is an agency of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) which administers state pensions, pension credit and disability benefits. It pays Disability Living Allowance or Attendance Allowance\(^4\) to around five million people needing care or mobility assistance because of a disability. Decisions on entitlements to these two allowances are made by around 1,300 professional decision makers\(^5\).

These decision makers were generally well informed on legal and technical issues, but PDCS felt they should be helped to develop stronger evaluative and considerative skills to improve their decision-making. Higher education is specifically able to develop these skills in learners.

After tendering, PDCS chose Chester because its approach was to put the employer firmly at the centre of the learning process. PDCS also felt that Chester had a good understanding of the complex role of the professional decision maker.

Fees for the programme were negotiated on the basis that PDCS would be partnering on curriculum development and delivery.

**Developing the partnership**

The partnership between Chester and PDCS started in early 2006. Rather than arriving with a ready-made portfolio, Chester worked with PDCS to design the Professionalism in Decision Making and Appeals (PIDMA) programme. PIDMA accredits previous learning and develops the skills of decision makers in the workplace.

The university seconded an experienced academic to the PDCS team in Blackpool. The initiative is managed by four people drawn from Chester and PDCS, with complementary skills spanning higher education, work-based learning, the NHS and disability issues.
PIDMA in practice

PIDMA has three levels:

- the foundation level for decision makers, which allows them to gain 30 credits with a Level 4 certificate
- the higher level for lead decision makers, at Level 5; those who successfully complete this are awarded a Professional Certificate with 60 credits
- those in decision-making management roles can earn a Level 6 Graduate Certificate with 60 credits.

An important goal for PDCS has been to make decision makers think more about their approach to their jobs. PDCS developed three key business principles to underpin the PIDMA work-based learning programme. These were: a career path for decision makers at PDCS; a performance framework to reflect national quality standards and a capability model that recognises increasing levels of ability and experience in decision makers.

PDCS also wanted the programme to change how customers and stakeholders viewed benefit decision-making. This led to four key principles for the work-based learning programme itself:

- it identifies the skills and qualities needed for each job
- it builds on what staff can already do and teaches them new skills
- it tests whether they can use these skills in the workplace and involve those around them to improve their work
- it checks that the improvements continue – decision makers are expected to work towards re-accreditation every three years.

Interactive workshops facilitated by the university tutor and PDCS staff enable the decision makers and their managers to identify where they need to improve their practice and knowledge. They then learn through their day-to-day work, submitting practical assignments and liaising with their tutors for coaching and feedback. Assessment is through a mix of oral and written reflection, discussion with managers and storyboards.

PDCS often has to respond quickly to changing policy. PIDMA is flexible enough to incorporate such changes and to allow students to demonstrate to their colleagues how to apply those changes. An in-house team helps to deliver
the programmes: three PDCS staff members have been accredited as associate tutors of the university and three others support them as learning facilitators. This approach has ensured that the programme is sustainable and cost-effective.

The result: improved customer service and job satisfaction

The programme is still in its infancy. But by early 2009, 150 PDCS staff had gained accreditation and PDCS hopes all its decision makers will benefit over time. Over the longer term, PDCS management hope for ‘hard’ returns in measurable performance and service quality. But in the short term, there is already encouraging evidence that embedding the high-level skills from the programme throughout PDCS is leading to improved customer service, job satisfaction and staff effectiveness. The DWP Standards Committee declared itself ‘impressed’ by the pilot programme in its 2007-08 annual report.

Many staff report positive benefits. One says: ‘As a higher executive officer manager, you see cases every day and although you don’t necessarily make the decisions, you need to understand the decision-making process and be able to advise, coach and mentor your decision makers. The programme really is great for that.’

‘PIDMA makes you think outside the box,’ says an executive officer decision maker. ‘No two cases are the same... how one customer deals with arthritis is completely different to another customer.’

Others share what they learn with colleagues. ‘People know I’ve been on the programme and as a result they ask my advice on more difficult cases,’ says another decision maker.

What the PDCS team learned from working with the university

The fact that senior members of the PIDMA team had already facilitated disability education for some years made an equal partnership with the university easier. However, they learned key lessons from the experience that would apply to any such partnership:

• work out what you want from the programme in advance
• both partners must learn how the other one works
• work-based learning may require the business to adopt new approaches to learning
• time away from desks has to be carefully managed, though on-the-job learning is a benefit of work-based learning
• managers should learn the principles of the programme first and other participants can act as role models to colleagues who haven’t yet joined the programme
• the curriculum should respond to changing business needs
• assessment should be cost-effective and enable lessons to be shared
• wider changes, including government agendas, may require changes to the job and the learning programme
• both partners need to have the flexibility to be creative and responsive with issues like the curriculum and assessment.

Lessons for others in developing their own programmes

Employers should consider four main lessons in developing similar programmes.

a. **Have a clear commitment to work together.** Before entering the partnership, PDCS knew what it wanted and was determined that it would work. Equally, Chester’s existing framework showed that it knew how to help PCDS achieve its goals. This enabled them to work together to develop the right programme.

b. **Have clear lines of communication.** There may be teething problems. By having a staff member on site in Blackpool, the university could resolve problems quickly.

c. **Develop joint teamwork between the organisation and university.** In the pilot phase, the different skills and experiences of the four team members ensured the project was led effectively and coherently. Their shared knowledge helped develop the right programme with the necessary rigour.

d. **Develop high-level skills in-house.** It is important to develop some in-house staff who can facilitate the programme’s continuity and ensure that line managers support those staff on the programme. They also helped change the culture at PDCS.
A negotiated work-based learning accreditation framework such as the PIDMA programme is one of the most responsive ways for universities to engage with employers. But it is important that the relationships are well managed. There is a balance between academic quality and employer needs. Universities must be ready to change their traditional timetables and ways of working. They may devolve responsibility for some provision to the employer, as happened with PDCS, although quality safeguards need to be in place.

At the same time, employers must recognise that a university education is about more than simply employee training. Otherwise, there may be tensions between employers wanting accreditation and universities demanding a degree of critical thinking and reflection. PDCS was clear from the beginning that it wanted a higher education approach as a means of improving capability in its staff.

**Could it work for you?**

Higher education/employer engagement approaches, like the PDCS/University of Chester partnership, can allow real co-operation between employers, learners and universities to meet business needs in a flexible way.

If you are interested in working with higher education to develop your workforce, you can:

- Contact Dave Perrin, Manager of the Professional Development Unit at the University of Chester, to find out about how your organisation could benefit (d.perrin@chester.ac.uk, 01244 512106).

- Contact a business unit at the university or college of your choice. Many now provide bespoke courses for employers. The Universities UK and GuildHE publication ‘Standing together: universities helping business through the downturn’ includes a list of contacts for each university and higher education college. It can be read at www.universitiesuk.ac.uk under Policy and research/Campaigns/Standing together.

- Or if you know what you need, but aren’t sure which university or college to work with, the Training Gateway (www.thetraininggateway.com) can help you find the right higher education partner.

- If you want to find out more about the PDCS experience you can contact Pauline Thompson, Head of PIDMA (Pauline.Thompson@dwp.gsi.gov.uk).
Notes

1 The NCIHE report is available at www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe.

2 The Lambert review can be read at www.hm-treasury.gov.uk under Consultations & legislation/Full index of consultations/2003 Closed consultations.

3 ‘Prosperity for all in a global economy: world-class skills’ (2006), Sandy Leitch’s review of the UK’s long-term skills needs, is available at www.hm-treasury.gov.uk under Independent Reviews.

4 Disability Living Allowance is paid to those under 65, Attendance Allowance to new claimants aged 65 and over.

5 Doctors made these decisions before 1992.

6 The number of credits is based on estimated learning hours (where one credit represents 10 notional hours of learning). Credits are often used towards qualifications: a foundation degree would typically involve 240 credits whereas a bachelors degree would require between 300 and 360 credits.

7 Refers to qualification tiers on the National Qualifications Framework. Level 4 is one tier higher than A-levels and BTEC National Diplomas. For full descriptions of each level, see www.direct.gov.uk under Education and Learning/What the different levels mean.