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University Certification of Work-based Learning in the UK

Christopher Prince

Abstract

This paper explores a number of important issues surrounding the certification of work-based learning (known as accreditation in the UK) for the award of university level qualifications. The paper is divided into two main sections. Section one of the paper defines, and explores the historical development of work-based certification and qualifications in the UK. This is followed in section two by defining various types of certification that are open to organizations, drawing upon real life case histories. The paper concludes by highlighting a number of factors certifying institutions and potential clients should consider when entering the certification marketplace.

Introduction

There has been growing interest in the importance of work-based learning amongst both academics and practitioners (Kotter 1995, Harrison 2000, Thomson et al 2001). As a consequence, the issue of providing learners with credit or awards for their learning has become increasingly important for organisations. It is the

processes by which universities certify work-based learning that forms the basis of this article. Writers such as Dealtry (2003) argue that certification has moved away from highly structured notions of formal 'campus based credit based qualifications' to new forms of learning based certification using 'organic learning experiences in real time events' to create 'career based accreditation' frameworks. While the tone of Dealtry's paper is one of looking to the future and articulating a development agenda for certifying learning within organisations, it must be stated that there are examples of organisations who are intimately involved in negotiating learning processes and content with universities and other awarding bodies. This paper seeks to examine the issues associated with certification by highlighting examples of best practice, drawing on the work of Nottingham Business School's Centre for Management Development. In addition, the paper will attempt to provide both the practitioner and the university academic with an overview of UK certification processes and some of the potential pitfalls associated with the certification of work-based learning.

Within the context of this paper the term certification will be used to describe the processes by which work-based learning is validated by an awarding body for certificate purposes, course credit purposes and degree credit purposes. In the UK the term 'accreditation' has become synonymous with

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all these activities, however, to avoid possible confusion the term certification will be used throughout the paper.

Section One: Defining certification

Certification is a complex process, which needs to be explored in some detail, as a working knowledge of these processes is useful in understanding the parameters that certifying bodies (in the case of work-based management learning – particularly universities) work within, and which organisations need to take cognisance of when seeking to certificate workplace learning.

Within the context of the UK, certification can be defined as: “The process by which an awarding body evaluates a programme of study (learning) to formally recognise the achievement of specified learning outcomes at a particular level” (NICATS 2003). The point to note here is that certification does not seek to measure inputs but demonstrable outputs (learning outcomes) through an assessment process set against clearly articulated assessment criteria. Achievement of the learning outcomes as demonstrated through the assessment mechanism leads to the award of credit. Credits can be awarded at either undergraduate or masters level. The notion of credit is important as credit provides the building blocks by which qualifications can be achieved. Most awarding institutions in the UK work to a tariff where one credit is usually awarded for ten notional hours of successful learning activity. Thus a postgraduate certificate is normally deemed to be 60 masters (M) level credits or is equivalent to 600 hours of learning activity, which is usually made up of a number of modules.

Thus one of the first and most important tasks in certifying any

organisational learning is to *identify* the learning outcomes which are achieved through the learning process, *assess* at what level these learning outcomes are being achieved, and *measure* the volume of learning activity supporting the achievement of these learning outcomes. It is these activities that determine the type of award which is available to the successful learner.

Work-based Learning and the Development of Certification Activity

There is a consistent strand of research which suggests that managers learn as much, and potentially more, from their day to day work, from colleagues, from observing managers and from other life experiences as they do from management training programmes (Davies and Easterby-Smith 1984, Kotter 1995, Dawes et al. 1996). There are several possible reasons for this. Some aspects of a manager's role are best learned on the job, being too complex to be taught through formal methods. Indeed, as Thomson et al (2001:153) point out: “Addressing isolated competencies removes the opportunity of learning how to employ these management competencies in an integrated way, which is what, in reality, managing effectively requires. Furthermore, practising is a key part of competence formation and formal courses rarely provide this facility in a way that fully replicates the workplace”.

Thus there is a growing realisation that work-based learning can be highly effective in developing managers, however until recently this type of learning has gone unrecognised by awarding bodies. It is only relatively recently that university certification for workplace learning has started to appear.

The development of work based certification is a relatively new phenomenon in the UK. Within much of the management development literature, for example Thomson et al (2001), certification is often described alongside traditional award-bearing programmes as if they were the same type of management development activity. Though they may be treated similarly in the literature, one could argue that they are fundamentally different.

Award bearing programmes are designed and usually delivered by the awarding body (university). The awarding body's staff usually teaches and assesses the learners. Though the programme may have been specifically designed for the client organisation, and may take place in the organisation's premises, fundamentally the university controls all aspects of the programme. This would be a classic definition of an in-company award bearing programme.

A work-based certificated programme on the other hand is somewhat different. Invariably it is designed around real learning activities that are being carried out within the organisation. Though the ultimate award rests with the university, in most cases much of the learning will involve the direct input of company's own staff and or external third-party consultants, facilitators and deliverers. Though university staff may play some role in delivering input, the only element over which the university has to retain control is the assessment and moderation processes. Thus while a traditional award bearing programme is designed from the perspective of giving the organisation a specific award (an MBA for example), certification approaches the situation from a different perspective. It identifies the level and volume of relevant learning taking place within the organisation

and then creates a relevant award to recognise this activity. Thus the processes associated with certification and standard in-company award bearing programmes are completely different.

A useful source of information regarding the historical development of in-company management education in the UK is a series of Harbridge House surveys conducted between 1984 and 1993. A survey conducted by Ascher (1984) found that there were twenty-three UK universities (no polytechnics) offering MBA's or equivalent MSc's on a full and part-time basis. There were no in-company award-bearing programmes and no certification activities. In 1986, a survey examining the tailored training market in the UK (Bateson 1986) found few universities involved in this market with the most commonly cited included London Business School, Manchester Business School, Templeton College, Bradford and Cranfield. Again, none of these programmes were certificated or award-bearing.

Interestingly, three years later, a report into the UK in-company MBA market (Baston 1989), did identify a sea change in the market for in-company management education. It appeared that organisations were beginning to demand certification for management education programmes. Of the fifteen certificated programmes operating in 1989, seven were consortium MBA's and eight were company specific schemes. For the first time the survey identified Sheffield and Middlesex Polytechnics amongst the players in this market. The final Harbridge House survey (Kennedy and Mason 1993) highlighted a large increase in demand for in-company programmes and in the number of suppliers. They identified fifty-three consortium and in-company MBA programmes, delivered by twenty-three

different universities. However, it is worth noting that this research only examined MBA programmes.

Research by Brown (1999) and Prince and Stewart (2000), highlights the growth through the 1990's of Certificate in Management (CM) and Diploma in Management Studies (DMS) programmes, and they suggest that the MBA market represents only the tip of the in-company programme iceberg. Prince and Stewart (2000) and Prince (2003) also highlighted the emergence of certification as a growing phenomenon, with the major players in the UK market being the new universities (ex polytechnics). Prince (2003) in a recent survey of activity within new universities (there are forty-seven new universities in the UK) found that forty percent of new universities undertake work-based certification, while sixty percent designed bespoke awards (awards created specifically for an individual organisation). When asked about areas of activity that were likely to grow these were the two areas that received the largest responses.

Research by Thomson et al (1997, 2001), Brown (1999) and DTI (2000) all point to a general increase in training across all levels of management in the UK over the last ten years. What emerges from these studies is recognition by organisations that the quality of an organisation's human resources represents a critical success factor and potential source of competitive advantage. Increasingly, this is linked with the imperative of integrating management development with other organisational systems and processes to ensure their effectiveness in delivering business goals. It is this trend, one can argue, which is fuelling the growth in certification activity.

Indeed anecdotal evidence from my own institution suggests a changing pattern of demand for management education is emerging, with recruitment to open postgraduate programmes fairly static, with annual enrolment of approximately seven hundred students, while in the last five years in-company student numbers have increased fourfold to over sixteen hundred students.

Section Two: Types of Certification platforms in the UK

Before highlighting examples of work-based learning certification it is important to understand the different meanings associated with the term, as certification can be used to cover a number of different scenarios. These will be explained in turn.

The Award of Credits

At its simplest but perhaps least useful from a learner's perspective, learning can be certificated in the form of free standing credits. Thus free standing modules are created and on successful completion the learner will receive say five or ten credits designated at a specific level.

While this does provide the learner with some recognition, credits in themselves are not recognised awards. Neither does the collection of a number of free standing modules and associated credits constitute a named award. Thus completing six free standing ten masters level credit modules will not give the learner a postgraduate certificate. Only completing six defined modules of a validated university programme leading to the award of a postgraduate certificate can achieve this outcome.

In the UK, one way around this dilemma is to create a "Certificate of

Achievement”, where learners can be awarded a university certificate which recognises that they have successfully achieved a specific number of credits through assessed activity, which is below that normally required for a recognised undergraduate degree or postgraduate certificate, diploma or masters qualification. One of the advantages of this type of certification is that the validation processes required by the awarding body tend to be quite minimal and not that complex. Thus for organisations requiring quick response times to ‘real time’ learning situations this may provide the answer. This will also be a relatively low cost option for those seeking an external quality stamp of a university. This type of certification is particularly useful when the planned learning interventions are quite small in terms of time available to the learners, or highly focused in terms of content, and thus full-scale awards would not be available to learners.

Case: Anglian Water Group (AWG)

Within AWG there was an identified need to recognise the development activities supporting the training of supervisors within the Group. A series of workshops were being delivered and on the job assessment was taking place to ensure that the learners gained the skills they and their organisation required. The programme was designed to be delivered by AWG’s own staff, with business school staff involved in the assessment and moderation processes. As this programme contained five modules totalling two hundred learning hours at undergraduate level, it was too small to gain a named award of the University, however it did meet the requirements for a Certificate of Achievement in Supervisory Management. This programme has now been operating successfully for over four years.

Certification Against an Existing Award

Another variant of certification takes the form of measuring the learning taking place against an existing award of the validating body. In effect the learning outcomes and volumes of activity are ‘mapped’ against those of the existing award. The aim is to provide a specific number of relevant credits against that named award, and by default identify the learning outcomes of the award that have not been met. In the UK this balance is often called a ‘top-up’. Learners who then complete the missing elements (usually modules from the validated award) will then receive that qualification. This type of certification and top up work is particularly common around the postgraduate CM and DMS programmes.

Of course mapping exercises are both time consuming and expensive. In addition this form of certification will by its very nature cause a demand not only for the credits associated with the mapping exercise, but will also create a demand for the top up to the award itself. Usually this type of certification occurs when the learning intervention has been designed and implemented by the organisation before the question is asked about its value and transferability.

In the UK, a number of organisations take the view that learning interventions should be designed to meet the specific needs of the organisation alone; often taking the view that certification will create unnecessary additional costs and effort to meet the requirements of the awarding body (Brown 1999). However, managers undertaking programmes are often quick to ask questions about the transferability and value of the learning they are undertaking. These pressures often lead to retrospective

certification of programmes. Ironically this often generates higher costs than if the programme had been designed and certificated from the outset. The power of managers on programmes and the motivational power of awards should not be underestimated by organisations.

Case: Bass plc

This illustration dates back to the early 1990's and is perhaps one of the first examples of this type of certification in the UK. Bass plc (now known as Six Continents) then a major brewing, pubs, leisure and hotel group, decided to develop a two year six module Senior Education Programme (SEP) to equip its middle managers for senior management positions within the group. It engaged Harbridge House as training consultants to design a programme. Once underway, the issue of certification arose. In conjunction with Nottingham Business School the programme was mapped against the School's DMS programme. In addition the assessment processes associated with the programme were examined and revised to assess learning outcomes at masters level. The result was that learners successfully completing the SEP would be awarded sixty M Level credits. Within this process the modules were delivered by staff from Harbridge House and Bass, NBS's role was in the approval and moderation of the assessment. A top up module was designed and delivered by NBS so that those managers could achieve a DMS. Interestingly, though it was never the intention at the outset, creating a DMS also inevitably created a demand for an MBA programme, this was operated successfully by NBS for Bass for over 5 years.

Bespoke Awards

This type of certification is perhaps the most akin to what Dealtry describes as a "form of learning that brings about positive changes in thinking and behaviour in relation to the very dynamic circumstances of organisational ecosystems". In order to achieve this there has to be a very high degree of co-alignment between the strategic learning objectives of the organisation and the learning needs of the individual managers.

In effect, in these instances certification takes the form of designing bespoke awards based on the requirements and needs of the organisation (and its learners), subject to meeting the required academic standards. Of all the three types of certification set out above, this is the most complex, time consuming and expensive to design and validate. It is however likely to offer the organisation the most benefits.

Case: British Steel

British Steel (now Corus) in the late 1990's embarked on a major change programme that had two distinct objectives. Firstly, to develop its senior and middle managers to perform as change agents who are able to lead complex and rapidly changing businesses. Secondly, to make significant cost reductions and savings by re-engineering major parts of its business. The change programme involved a series of major projects, which in the process of generating substantial business improvements also provided the managers seconded on to these projects with the training and support to develop the requisite change management skills. In order to facilitate this ambitious project, a firm of leading change management consultants Gemini Consulting had been engaged. In association with British Steel's Management College (Ashorne Hill now known as i to i)

and Nottingham Business School, learning materials and workshops were developed to support the managers throughout the life of these change projects (about nine months in duration). In order to recognise the quality of the learning that took place on the projects, a Postgraduate Diploma in Transformation Management was developed by Nottingham Business School specifically for these managers.

Case: The Insolvency Service

The Insolvency Service wished to develop a series of qualifications based upon the specific requirement of training individuals to become qualified Insolvency Service Examiners. Given the highly specialist knowledge and skills required, the Insolvency Service (IS) had built up over the years a number of in-house courses and developed a number of competence based standards designed to reflect the skills required of a fully competent Examiner. The IS wanted those who successfully completed the three-year training programme to be recognised with relevant qualifications. Working in partnership with Nottingham Business School an Advanced Certificate and Diploma in Insolvency Practice were designed to meet the Insolvency Services requirements through recognising the in-house learning (and assessment) that was taking place.

University Certification Processes

The internal bureaucracy associated with university programme approval mechanisms is often raised as an issue which dissuades organisations from undertaking certification of work-based learning (Brown 1999). However, understanding some of the higher level principles which guide these processes is useful for those contemplating programme

certification. It is important to remember that awards are granted by the university – not individual faculties. However, in most universities individual faculties have internal mechanisms and committees to approve the certification of up to twenty or thirty credits. Usually this allows for the award of small scale certificates of achievement. The fact that this process of certification can remain within the faculty, and requires only minimal paperwork means that this type of certification can be achieved relatively quickly (four to six weeks) and relatively inexpensively.

The certification of major award bearing programmes involves a much more rigorous approach. The process involves the preparation of a validation document that covers such areas as course rationale and philosophy, course structure and module content, teaching and learning strategy, assessment strategy and the resources available to support the programme. This can take upwards of two to three months to produce. In addition, the university would hold a validation event, at which a panel of internal university staff and external experts would be invited to examine the programme and question the course team (sponsoring faculty and the host company). The validation panel would then make its recommendations to the university as to whether or not the programme should be validated. Anyone who has gone through such a process would realise that these are not mere rubberstamping exercises, and programmes can be rejected or subject to major conditions and revisions. One should expect a minimum of six months lead time when designing a major bespoke accredited programme.

Case Illustration Learning Points for Certifying Institutions

There is little doubt that certification is a growing phenomenon within the UK management education marketplace. However, there are few specific guidelines on certification, other than the UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Guidelines on Collaborative Provision (2001) (which are only partially relevant to this type of activity). A consequence of this lack of clear national guidelines is that certain institutions appear to be more willing to take on a more active role in this area than others. For those institutions who may be interested in developing capabilities in certifying work-based learning there are a number of important considerations:

Relationship Between Faculty and Central Administration

The relationship between the faculty and the university's central administration is crucial. There must be willingness on the part of the university to engage with organisations in certifying work-based learning. In many universities this is not the case, tight central control; issues of diluting the quality of awards are all reasons that stop institutions working with corporate clients on work-based learning projects (Prince 2002). If there is little central support for certification then it is very difficult for a business school or any other faculty to develop certificated programmes.

Where there is support, there is a very strong need for the faculty and university's central services to work very closely together, as it is important for the credibility of the faculty that the advice and proposals it puts forward when working with a potential client will meet the university's validation requirements. As was stated earlier, with few hard and fast guidelines on certification at national and often at institutional level, there is a good deal of tacit knowledge involved in

developing successful certificated programmes. Working closely with the university's authorities is crucial to ensure the advice given to potential client organisations is correct, and potentially embarrassing situations of having programmes rejected by the university can be avoided.

Though certification of work-based learning might involve little direct teaching and input by the awarding institution, there is still a need for very good communication between the client and its staff, potential third party deliverers and the university, and for the faculty to actively manage these relationships. In managing these relationships a number of crucial areas need to be particularly scrutinised.

Quality assurance is fundamental to the sound operation of any award-bearing programme. Certificated awards require all the same quality assurance processes and procedures as any other university award. Therefore module reports, student feedback, staff student course committee minutes and annual course reports will all need to be produced and monitored. With the possibility of external staff from outside the university delivering modules and learning interventions then it is important for all staff involved to be aware of the university's requirements and adhere to its quality assurance guidelines.

In some cases, third party staff (properly qualified and approved) can be used to teach and assess students, where this is the case there is still the need for all assessments to be approved and moderated by faculty staff and for work to be processed through boards of examiners meetings and for external examiners to ratify awards. This will also involve external staff attending at boards of examiners meeting. Therefore all parties

from the outset need to be aware of their duties and responsibilities.

Throughout all of these important processes all staff involved must comply with the procedures laid down by the university. Experience suggests that many of these academic practices are alien to many private providers, consultants and company trainers, and to non university staff it is often difficult to understand their relevance and importance. However it is vital to impress upon external staff the need to comply with these regulations. Educating all parties on their responsibilities and monitoring to ensure compliance is a crucial and time consuming activity that the faculty will have to take very seriously if the integrity of the award is to be maintained.

The need to provide staff development to the client organisation's 'teaching' staff and to other third party providers is also very important. Staff development is also likely to take place to ensure all tutors are assessing to the appropriate standards and providing appropriate feedback to learners. Staff development might also arise out issues identified by feedback from students, or external examiners. Certifying institutions must be prepared to organise such sessions as appropriate and ensure that all relevant staff attend. Client organisations will also have to be aware that these additional sessions may be required and be willing to pay for such events.

Relationship Between Client and Certification Provider

There must be an open and trusting relationship between all parties. Certification relies on all parties seeking to ensure that the highest academic standards are maintained, and when issues arise taking appropriate action so that they are dealt with

in and open and appropriate manner. Issues can arise when client organisations put cost above quality and when organisations become defensive or even seek to cover up issues. Unless there is a culture of trust and partnership, certification arrangements can become fraught with difficulty. Therefore it is important for any certifying body to be assured that their potential client shares their values about maintaining and enhancing the integrity of the awards they are receiving. If this is not the case a policing relationship and blame culture can arise which can be highly counter productive and difficult to manage, and may lead to the breakdown of the programme.

Transparency in Type and Level of Certification

It is very important for potential clients and students to understand the nature of the awards or credits they will be receiving. An advanced diploma may a sound high level course, but it could for instance be pitched at undergraduate level. It is important that all parties know what they will receive as a result of the certification and what possible progression awards open to them. Often one can find that what satisfies the client organisation (who may just want any award) may not meet the expectations of the learners, who may for example have their own aspirations – wanting advanced standing on the MBA - for instance. Where the nature of the award is not made clear it can create serious motivational problems for the learners, and damage the working relationship between the client and the university.

In a UK context, awarding bodies can sometimes make claims for a certificated award in terms of its transferability and currency that may not provide the progression routes that may have been

implied. For instance, a CM may give advanced standing on the university's own MBA programme, but there can be no guarantee that another university would offer the same advanced standing on their MBA programme.

The Volume and Scale of the Programme

From the outset it is important to understand the potential scale of the certification project both in terms of potential student numbers, geographical locations and potentially international dimensions to the project. All these factors will affect not so much the learning delivered to the learners but the processes that will have to be put in place to support the programme, and its quality assurance and assessment requirements. This can have large cost implications which may not become clear until the programme is up and running. It is often difficult to renegotiate contracts once fees have been agreed with the client.

Pricing Certification Services

When pricing certification programmes for organisations, it is all too easy to view quality assurance and assessment as the total costs incurred, and price accordingly. However, coordination meetings, staff development and dealing with issues as they arise (and they will!) are all time consuming activities. It is also very important to agree with the client who will undertake such apparently simple things as the administration of the programme. Skills in tracking large numbers of students and their assignments, extensions, deferrals and referred work are second nature to academic institutions but they can create problems for client company staff suddenly given the responsibility for tracking large amounts of assignments.

In my experience many organisations believe certification to be a fairly cheap and simple process. What many do not appreciate are the 'hidden' staff development, quality assurance, assessment and moderation costs which support certification and these can be quite considerable. It is important to share with clients the likely potential costs of schemes at an early stage, as many will be surprised at the actual costs of operating a high quality certificated programme.

Practitioner Guide to Accreditation – Avoiding the Pitfalls

Organisations seeking to develop a certification arrangement with a university would do well to consider a number of factors when engaging in dialogues with potential certification providers.

Understand the Different Certification Options Open to Them

It is important for clients to identify all possible certification options from bespoke awards to the awarding of credits and certificates of achievement. The type of certification will have a substantial effect on the cost and time-scale required before a programme can commence.

It is important to understand the motivation for certification, in some cases offering certification – but only at the credit level - can sometimes create more confusion in the minds of the learners than it can reward their efforts. Investing time and money in having learning interventions certified, but which have little currency or transferability outside of the host organisation may not create the motivational effect that was expected. Where possible it is important to have a scheme which

generates at least a certificate of achievement, or where the awarding body will count the credits towards a suitable named award, the DMS or MBA for example.

Develop a clear brief of the desired objectives and learning outcomes required. Also provide potential suppliers with information on the number, experience and educational background of the learners, and any major constraints (for example amount of days available to take participants off the job, window of opportunity for the work to be undertaken). These factors can affect the level of academic award open to the potential delegates. Be careful not to raise the expectations of the learners until discussions with potential providers have given some indication of the potential awards available to recognise the learning that is taking place. Be realistic -- in the UK a masters degree is equivalent to 1800 hours of learning!

Do homework on potential certifying institutions and consult widely prior to tendering.

As this article has indicated, in the UK certification is an emerging area of activity for business schools and universities. Depending on the organisation's requirements some business schools are going to be more responsive and flexible than others. Equally, discussing alternative designs prior to issuing the tender could identify options that the organisation may not have thought possible.

Check Business School Track Records.

Not all business schools are the same. If the organisation is seeking to design an innovative and complex new learning intervention it should seek out those business schools that have a track record of

designing and successfully gaining certification for such activities. The organisation would do well to note that university processes and procedures will not be as straightforward as they imagine. They should also remember that it is the university that confers awards not the business school, therefore what a business school believes is possible, and what the university is willing to certificate may be two different things. Working with an experienced business school can take a good deal of the anxiety out of this process.

Work in Partnership.

The organisation should seek to work in partnership with its chosen educational partner. Therefore when seeking tenders from business schools the organisation should concentrate on the processes for joint collaboration in the design, delivery, evaluation and on-going review of the proposed learning intervention, and not demand to see fully worked up proposals. Organisations need to recognise that ownership of the programme really needs to rest with them; any truly effective programme needs the on going input of both parties. Experience suggests that programmes continually change and develop throughout their life. Organisations seeking instant answers from potential suppliers who do not have a detailed understanding of their business are likely to be disappointed with the results.

Certification – The Benefits

The certification is a growing area of activity for UK universities and their business schools but it is still in its relative infancy. It is clear that institutions have to work within the parameters of their academic regulations, though some institutions are much more flexible and innovative than others. It is also

clear that not all learning interventions will be able to be accredited, or that the costs associated with the process will always justify the expense. There are though, real benefits to be gained from certification.

Developing Knowledge and Understanding

Within a workplace setting developing and using the tools and techniques of management are important; however technical mastery can sometimes be achieved without a full understanding of, and knowledge of the theory which underpins these concepts. Providing certification can and will bolster the underpinning knowledge of the workplace learning and thus improve the learners understanding of the tools and techniques that they use, hopefully in an more 'critical' manner.

Motivation

Providing university recognition of workplace learning can be a powerful motivating force for individual learners on the programme. However, from the outset, it must be made clear to the learners what type and level of award they are going to receive and what options are open to them on completion of the award. Failure to do this can create the opposite effect to that of what was envisaged if expectations are not met. Indeed from the outset organisations need to think not just about the certification of individual awards – but rather need to look at frameworks of awards that clearly articulate a development path for managers within the organisation. There is evidence to suggest that where this occurs staff retention rates are substantially higher than in organisations where these do not exist (Thomson et al 2001).

External quality badge

Linked to the point above, development activity that has an external quality benchmark gives an added validity to the activity that is undertaken. Increasingly, organisations are seeking ways in which they can signal their commitment to quality in all aspects of their activity (Stewart 1999), university certification is one manifestation of this phenomenon.

The Future

Certification in the UK is still in its infancy, and there is still a great deal of ignorance within the practitioner community about certification and its potential benefits. As the need for more real time learning interventions grows, and corporate universities emerge in organisations as the champions of continuous learning, the future looks bright for certification becoming a much more mainstream activity for corporations and universities. Indeed with the UK Government's Department of Education and Skills (2003) now apparently considering the granting of award bearing powers to commercial organisations, the flood gates might be about to open for accreditation, as the most appropriate mechanism to reward real work-based learning.

Conclusions

Certification is a growing activity in the UK, and is responding to the needs of organisations seeking to recognise the substantial amounts of work-based learning that is taking place. This is seen particularly by new universities as a growing source of new business. Certification ranges from the award of credits, through to the design of bespoke awards. One of the major blocks on the growth of certification is the lack of knowledge organisations have regarding the

range of certification options that are now open to them. Hopefully papers such as this help to raise the profile of certification, and offer organisations opportunities to gain recognition for the important learning that is happening within the workplace.

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