Integrating professional recognition into the development of higher education qualifications – Middlesex University

Aim
To produce a model for the development of work-based higher education programmes that build on and fully integrate professional competencies providing access to professional body membership

Background
The UK Contractors Group (representative of the largest construction employers in the UK) requested a universal qualification that gave clear career progression opportunities for those who wish to move into site management roles, either by progressing from Advanced Apprenticeships or for people who are already working in the industry and requiring recognition as a professional.

Middlesex University leads a national Consortium to develop and deliver the Higher Apprenticeships in Construction Operations Management (HA COM) to achieve this, which includes:
- CITB-Construction Skills
- University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC)
- Mixed Economy Group of Colleges (MEG)
- Lifelong Learning Network National Forum (LLN Forum)

The opportunity to gain a university qualification (a work-based Foundation degree) and attract Grant Scheme funding and Professional Body recognition was very attractive to employers.

The Professional Body community were consulted to test their response to the construct: a Foundation degree giving a Level 5 Higher Apprenticeship in Construction Operations Management - an integrated learning approach to developing knowledge and competency.

A case study demonstrating the transformation of construction management practice
The Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England (SASE), which regulates all apprenticeships was revised to include a number of key changes:
- Higher Apprenticeships at level 6 and 7 (Honours and Masters degree levels)
- Full inclusion of HE qualifications and degrees
- Emphasis on gaining professional recognition

Consequently a Level 6 Higher Apprenticeship in Construction Management (Honours degree) was designed predicated on the interdependence of the professional disciplines contributing to running a construction site. The principles used to create this considered:
- Curriculum focus to develop understanding of the complimentary nature of the roles by focusing on mutual understanding of each other’s role to enhance sector practice
- Encouraging participants to develop their understanding and competence as site management professionals together as they pursue their key specialist pathway:
  - Site Manager, Quantity Surveyor or Commercial Manager and Civil Engineering Manager - Specialist Technical roles with common management aims
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- Focus on generic management concerns central to the role of a manager rather than a discipline focused approach – through focusing on core learning regarding Quality, Cost & Time (QCT) elements
- Integrating relevant professional body membership and the potential for dual recognition
- The impact and effect that the project’s form of Contract has on management behaviour and project outcomes
- Deeper understanding of other professionals’ perspective - the final project module will account for wider and more general construction project themes.

The key benefits of integrating professional recognition

The benefit of Professional Body recognition has been noted by SASE and in this case the following benefits are immediately relevant. From the point of view of Middlesex University the benefit of professional recognition together with a degree that is work based allows integration of skills, knowledge and competence to be demonstrated through the work based focus of the modules:

- Graduates are able to apply for professional membership immediately on completing the programme as the recognition by the professional body gives direct access to chartered professional membership. This direct access is more quickly achieved than through traditional approaches.
- A closer alignment of academic and professional requirements resulting in a clearer ‘offer’ for the aspiring professional
- ‘The best of both worlds’ in offering the achievement of university qualifications and professional recognition through learning at work - the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS)
- RICS also agreed that:
  - “The foundation degree in conjunction with the necessary work experience would be suitable for direct entry to Associate Membership”
  - “We welcome the innovative approach of Middlesex University to providing Higher Apprenticeship routes through to professional membership. Higher Apprenticeships that are built on work-based degrees have the potential to open doors for aspiring professionals for while maintaining professional standards”
- Discussions for professional recognition with the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) and the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) are underway to gain similar professional recognition.

Recommendations

The following processes have facilitated setting the scene for integrating professional body recognition:

**Define and agree with employers/Professional Body:**

- Aim or purpose of development. What need is the development seeking to address?
- Secure curriculum proposal ‘sign-up’ and ‘sign-off’ - liaise with Professional Body
- Determine ‘fit’ - are they prepared to accept the delivery model?
- Identification of common themes that are central to practice in relation to industry job roles
- Determine the form of engagement (e.g.: Advisory Group), the schedule for development, and the key deliverables
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Identify and review competence framework(s) with Professional Bodies:
- Clarify appropriate Academic level and link to Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) and/or the Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF)
- Determine aspirational levels of Professional Body membership e.g., Associate, Chartered etc
- Develop understanding of the role’s ‘Sphere of Influence’ and ‘Levels of responsibility’ (e.g., National Occupational Standards)
- Determine curriculum requirements for Professional Body recognition
- Explore required work experience evidence in appropriate level of membership

Processes leading towards a curriculum that integrates professional body recognition:
Map professional competence framework against curriculum framework - Gap analysis
- Deconstruct Professional Body competence model - note evidence requirement, or learning objectives

Develop learning outcomes that reflect and align with the identified Professional Body competence framework:
- Demonstrate which modules’ learning objective fulfil or partly meets the competence
- Identify overlap, e.g., where two or more Professional Bodies have similar competency requirement

Develop appropriate work-based learning and authentic assessment activities that generate evidence to meet learning outcomes, considering:
- Input and work-based learning, Theory and Practice, HE delivery and assessment requirements, expectations and approaches
- Specific approaches to the assessment of competence, e.g., role of Workplace Mentors, etc.
- Identify required evidence demonstrating professional competence to lead to membership, e.g., professional development portfolios etc

Contact: Darryll Bravenboer, Head of Academic Development, d.bravenboer@mdx.ac.uk Tel 020 8411 5479