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What KUBIS did: creating educational space for small and medium-sized enterprises

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Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) produce over 50% of the private sector turnover in the UK economy. They also employ nearly 60% of the workforce in this sector and make up 99.9% of all enterprises (BIS, 2009). The trend over the last decade has shown a significant increase in the number of SMEs as the traditional UK base of larger companies decreases. This means that SMEs are critically important to the future of the UK economy; a factor that is particularly significant during a period of economic rebuild resulting from financial recession. Therefore, the ability of SMEs to succeed, and, by association, the quality of the skill-base of SME staff, is not just a private matter for small firms, but has a relevance to wider society.

SMEs are generally viewed as a difficult market to address from a higher education standpoint. A traditional university employer engagement model tends either to provide bespoke courses for large employers, where a significant-sized cohort is guaranteed every year, or to provide more generic part-time courses. While the latter are perceived by the University as neutral as to the size of the students' company, some SMEs see them as being significantly biased in favour of larger organisations (Thomas, 2010).

Kingston's approach

Their importance to the UK economy and the size of the potential market (23 million employees) were two reasons why Kingston University decided to tackle the SME market. Funding was provided for this by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) as part of their Employer Engagement initiative. The Kingston University Business Interaction with SMEs (KUBIS)

project was set up in 2007 to find out what smaller enterprises needed and to build learning opportunities to meet that need. KUBIS found that local SMEs (in London and the South East of England) wanted courses that would help to improve their business processes; that were flexible as to time and place of delivery (smaller companies typically find traditional day release arrangements problematic); that could be tailored to the individual firm and the work role of the person studying; and that would provide relevant project work, so that the company as well as the individual could benefit directly from the learning.

The KUBIS Model

To meet this need KUBIS developed a structured, work-based learning Foundation Degree in Business Process Development. Students designed their own learning activities and outcomes, with support from academic staff and workplace mentors, and planned and carried out work-based projects which enabled them to fulfil these outcomes. Initially students carried out taught, structured, online study, using a social networking environment, KubiSpace. This environment, which was constructed using the freely available tools and technologies Elgg and Drupal, is built around a Personal Development Portfolio (PDP) framework, where the personal profile (as it is commonly called in social networking applications) is the basis of the PDP.

Using KubiSpace in their initial, tutor-led learning familiarises students with it, and makes it easier for them to use it more fully in their work-based project modules. Students can keep all their work in the PDP and can make elements of their portfolio available to anyone

they wish. So, for example, students might make finished pieces of work available to their tutor, and work in progress available to peers or to their mentor, for comment. Importantly, learners can publish pages of their portfolio to people outside KubiSpace. Thus they can create a community with others with similar interests who are not connected with the course, and these contacts can be located anywhere in the world.

KubiSpace acts as a social networking environment in that students can choose who their contacts are, and connect to these contacts. They can create areas where they can share found or created content with others; they can have online discussions using noticeboards or chatrooms; they can send each other private messages or post public messages for individuals to see and respond to. This encourages the social and affective elements which support a work-based, online programme of study at a distance, what Bosley and Young (2006) call the 'soft underpinning' that constitutes an essential part of the educational experience. Boud argues that collaborative learning can be further consolidated if the "environment of mutual help ... continues over time and beyond the classroom" (Boud, 2001, p. 11) and this is something that has been built into the application of the course. In the early structured learning on the programme, students carry out exercises where they work together and learn from each other, and the social networking aspect of KubiSpace encourages this to continue as they move into the individualised learning experience of the projects.

CoPs at work

Lave and Wenger's early (1991) work on Communities of Practice (CoPs) was based on studies of how people learned in workplaces, according to an apprenticeship approach. This they call 'legitimate peripheral participation'. Legitimate peripheral participation describes the process by which newcomers to the work group learn more about the work, gradually develop expertise, and then pass on knowledge to other newcomers. Educational technology theorists have become interested in CoPs over the last couple of decades (e.g. Seale, 2004), as they describe the ideal online social learning situation. However, it is a concept that is particularly important for KubiSpace, as learners are actually in the workplace, learning from colleagues, peers on the programme who may work for other firms, and the wider online community. And it is the third area that is a significant addition to the KubiSpace learners' CoP.

Work-based education of this type provides a much more individualised learning experience than a more traditional, externally structured and taught distance learning course. Many of the kinds of areas to which learners apply themselves in their projects are very specific and specialist. The KubiSpace environment, however, offers them tools and skills development which enable them to locate and use web-based information. Critically, these tools also enable them to make contacts with others who are interested in the same areas. The 'long tail' often referred to in discussion of Web 2.0 culture (a retail concept which describes the approach of selling small unit numbers of a large range of items, as opposed to selling large numbers of a small range) means that there are online communities available for any area of interest, however specific. For example, a student may work in Lewisham and be a specialist in a particular method of designing and producing sash windows. While there might be only one or two other people in their locale who work in this area, there might be 20 or 30 in the UK and hundreds or thousands in the world. And some of these people will have already created an online CoP, in which the learner can participate. More importantly, another sash window maker in Texas is less likely to be a competitor than a contact nearer home would be, so it becomes more possible for students and firms to learn from the best practice of other businesses internationally.

Conclusion

It has been observed that SME employees do not, typically, have the opportunity to improve their skills through training and education, particularly through higher education (Johnston and Loader, 2003). If education and training are not made available to staff employed by these companies, the UK skill-base will not grow by anything approaching the aspirations of the Leitch (2006) agenda. The KUBIS project has proved that with a little imagination it is possible to find a model which makes it possible for SMEs to engage with higher education, by finding paradigms and approaches that are meaningful for both universities and small businesses. Given the size of the potential SME market, there is room for a range of other models, and given the importance of SMEs to the UK economy there are plenty of reasons to develop them.

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