

Early employer engagement: does it really matter?

4-minute read



Key contact

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Overview

An often misunderstood and neglected element of HTQs is the extent to which employer engagement is required *during* the qualification development process. Drawing on direct experience of engaging with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) Sarah tells us about the importance of developing and maintaining *meaningful engagement with industry and company contacts* at all stages of HTQ design, development and accreditation.

Introduction

This case study relates to the development process of an HTQ in construction, as part of HTQ Cycle 3 submission round in 2022. I led this in my capacity as Head of Department and also, due to local staffing constraints, took overall responsibility for the (successful) completion of Solent University's construction submission. Of course, I didn't do this all on my own. While I was exploring the landscape and undertaking the mapping, the course leader and team were key to signposting me to the evidence I needed to gather for the submission.

Co-constructing HTQs

While developing the construction qualification, I became aware that IfATE was offering support workshops. Academic teams were encouraged, through these, and other more focused support opportunities, to work with IfATE qualification managers in an iterative manner. The understandable logic of this very supportive and hands-on approach was that, given the work and detailed auditing involved in an HTQ submission, and the fact that the process itself was relatively new, it was in everyone's interests to work together for a positive outcome.

I am extremely glad I took up this opportunity, despite the many other urgent matters calling for my attention, as the investment of time was invaluable. It was through this collaborative process that I became aware of the vital importance of employer engagement – something that could be easily overlooked due to the classroom-based nature of the HTQ qualifications, and the fact that the accreditation process could be mistaken as the simple rebadging of existing qualifications.

Laying strong foundations

In conversation with the qualification manager for my particular subject area I learned that a large number of submissions are referred back to the submitting provider because they have not fully understood the nature and extent of the employer engagement required. So, during our development and submission period, we convened an employers' consultative panel. Here, panel members and the course team worked together to conduct a thorough review of the curriculum and identified several useful ideas for better employer engagement.

One week before our panel meeting, we distributed the module descriptors to the employers for review. At the meeting, we then went through each module and gave the employers the opportunity to provide feedback. We asked the panel to pay particular attention to the topics and themes of study and advise on their suitability and any gaps. Although our primary focus was subject-specific, one employer helpfully highlighted the importance of extending the curriculum to include soft skills in the areas of communication, leadership and management, and mental health and wellbeing.

Based on this feedback and our discussions, we created a set of agreed actions and changes to the module descriptors. Once completed, these were sent again to the employers for their approval. Importantly, we kept minutes of the meeting which formed part of our HTQ submission evidence base.

Putting learning into practice

The lessons I learnt while developing the construction qualification came in very handy shortly after the process completed. Following an internal reorganisation, our Digital HTQs (already

submitted to IfATE) moved into my area of responsibility. As the most experienced member of the team at that time, I found myself working again with IfATE to respond to queries and recommendations – which interestingly were primarily focused on (a lack of) employer engagement. Digital colleagues had unfortunately not had the same iterative engagement with their subject qualifications manager, but fortunately the good relationship I had already built with IfATE paid off at this point. We were able to gain their confidence that the required changes could and would be made swiftly. To put this into action, I immediately set about creating two digital employers' consultative panels, which followed a similar process to that adopted for construction.

My main recommendations to any colleagues applying for HTQ accreditation are to engage with employers as soon as possible, listen to their feedback and, crucially, evidence how you have acted on this feedback. While this process can be time consuming, it has proved itself invaluable - not only for our successful completion of the accreditation process but, perhaps more importantly, to ensure that our HTQ qualifications can be marketed as fully reflective of current industry practice.