CHAPTER 9

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SKILLS DEVELOPMENT: TEN YEARS OF EVOLUTION FROM INSTITUTIONAL SPECIFICATION TO A MORE STUDENT-CENTRED APPROACH

1. INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The University of Luton was established in 1993 from a local College of Technology. From its inception it has been committed to vocational education and providing educational opportunity for all who might benefit. Since 1993 the University’s profile has changed considerably with an initial rapid expansion in student numbers followed by a reduction in home undergraduate recruitment counterbalanced by increased international and postgraduate students. Currently the student population is around 14,000 in three faculties: Creative Arts, Technologies and Science; Health and Social Sciences; and the Luton Business School. The annual in-take of UK students into full-time undergraduate provision is around 1500, the majority of whom are local to the university. The student population is ethnically diverse with a significant proportion (45%) over 21.

From its inception the University has been fully committed to modularity. Programmes are organized within undergraduate and postgraduate schemes which use a common credit and regulatory framework. In the early years students could choose from single and combined (major, joint and minor) awards at undergraduate level in most areas of provision but there has been a recent move away from providing such a wide choice since it has proved difficult to manage the students’ experience effectively – both in terms of student development through the curriculum and student support and communication. In order to ensure consistency, within a modular framework with students studying across subjects, there has been a large element of central specification of curriculum policy with local implementation. This has been true of skills development where there has been an institutional framework within which all programme areas are expected to work since 1994.

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2. CORE CURRICULUM ELEMENTS: SKILLS AND EMPLOYABILITY

Responding to the needs of its diverse student body has governed institutional thinking about the nature of the curriculum. Two inter-related issues have been identified as being important to the University and its widening access and vocational mission: skills development and employability.

The basis of the University’s emphasis on skills development can be found in its interaction with its diverse student population. Many of the University’s students have been out of mainstream education for a number of years, few of their peer group will have studied beyond 18 and they are often the first family member to attend higher education. Responding to their needs has required education and development – on all sides. Whilst students are intelligent and able to balance the many competing demands of their everyday lives (including the growing need to work whilst studying), they are often not used to conversing and communicating in a way which academics recognize as being appropriate to study and assessment in a higher education context. The initial reaction is to blame the colleges and the secondary schools who in turn blame the primary schools and the primary schools the parents. The University has attempted to address this issue through an emphasis on skills development throughout the curriculum making it the responsibility of all academic staff with appropriate specialist support where necessary.

Whilst the importance of addressing skills throughout the curriculum has been largely, although not completely, uncontested (Atlay & Harris 2000); the extent to which the University should be responding to the perceived employment needs of the public sector, industry, commerce and the professions has been more controversial. There were those that were comfortable with the notion of a vocational curriculum whilst others favoured a more liberal arts approach. The reality has been that during the past five years students have largely voted with their feet. Courses in areas such as English and History have closed due to declining student numbers whilst vocationally related courses (such as social work, applied media and business studies) have expanded. Financial considerations are important when students are considering whether to enter full-time higher education and vocationally relevant education is seen as providing easier access to employment. Short term debt needs to be off-set by a long-term ambition for the higher earnings that a degree brings. In such a context, where there is heavy marketing of the benefits that higher education brings, there is a moral obligation on the University to ensure that students are prepared for graduate employment – ‘employability’ has thus become a key curriculum driver.