

Education in Security and Risk: The Need for Academic and Vocational Synergy



When it comes to education for practising security and risk management professionals, there needs to be a genuine attempt to merge both skills and knowledge sets, and also construct and offer courses that genuinely combine the academic with the vocational. Ken Livingstone outlines a new MSc course devised by the Perpetuity Academy and the University of South Wales which is based on that model

The Conservative Government's recent decision to rate universities as either Gold, Silver or Bronze based on their teaching quality comes into effect next year. The move represents a very positive step forward in terms of providing students with a clear indication of teaching standards.

This 'medal' system – and a Bronze rating here isn't good news – marks something of a sea change in the performance grading of universities. Up until now, university performance has primarily been measured by research success, but this hasn't always aligned with the student learning experience.

While recognising the importance of good research in expanding knowledge, and fully acknowledging that good research provides sound learning material, it seems odd to largely ignore the quality of delivery and focus instead on the publication of research papers many of which have little real impact.

Walking into a lecture hall, students will be much more interested in the skills of their lecturer to teach the subject well, rather than his or her ability to publish an esoteric paper in the pages of an obscure journal.

The burgeoning emphasis on teaching quality is largely due to the increasing cost of a university education. From August 2017, publicly-funded universities and colleges will be able to charge up to £9,250 per year for

courses (subject to Parliamentary approval). This is a huge investment for the student, and doesn't take into account living costs.

When a student is making this kind of investment, and likely committing to a huge loan to fund it, it's no surprise that quality of teaching is a huge part of the decision-making process when selecting a university.

Alongside teaching quality sits the thorny issue of subject matter relevance. Knowledge for its own sake is a long-established principle in universities and it is now, as it has always been, a good guiding principle. However, there's a need in some areas to balance degree subject with degree application, and particularly so as the ultimate usefulness or value of the degree obtained will go a long way towards determining future employment prospects and how long it will take to pay off that substantial loan.

Risk and security focus

In the risk and security profession, there have traditionally been two threads running through the provision of education and qualifications. The universities and colleges have provided academic courses and degrees with an emphasis on theory and scholastic excellence, while vocational training companies have offered certification in workplace skills with an emphasis on Best Practice. In recent years, however, these separate threads have become increasingly intertwined with the distinction between them increasingly blurred.

Training providers who once were the sole arbiters of their own quality and courses are increasingly applying to have their courses accredited by formal awarding bodies. There are significant benefits to doing so for both the learner and the training provider. The training provider can market a course that not only combines vocational knowledge and Best Practice, but also provides a formal qualification. This makes it much more attractive in the marketplace and often allows a premium price to be charged.

For their part, the learner enjoys a guarantee of quality, and gains both knowledge and an educational qualification. This plays much more strongly to their CV and ongoing professional development, with the qualification significantly increasing the value of the training in both their own and employers' eyes.

The offer of these accredited vocational qualifications, together with the potential profits associated with them, has not gone unnoticed by the universities and colleges. Ideally placed to offer recognised qualifications, many universities and colleges have entered – or further expanded into – the vocational training market, including some who've developed risk and security courses.

Squaring the circle

As you might expect, the quality of provision across the universities and training companies varies, but a fundamental problem is that universities tend to be less well informed with regard to vocational risk and security, while for their part the training companies are often more geared towards vocational training than they are theoretical education.

Universities and colleges can be light on vocational expertise, while the training companies may be light on theory and academic rigour. This isn't true in every case, of course, but as a general rule of thumb it's more consistent than not.

What's missing is a determined effort by either the universities and colleges or the training companies themselves to marry academic theory and excellence with professional Best Practice and experience.

Simply offering a vocational course through a university or an accredited qualification through a training company isn't sufficient. There needs to be a genuine attempt to merge both skills and knowledge sets, and also construct and offer courses that genuinely combine the academic with the vocational.

It's this type of course that security and risk management professionals are seeking, and it's this type of course which will help those same security and risk professionals continue to develop and seize future opportunities.

Forming a new approach

Let's examine the present partnership between a commercial training provider and a university to create such a course. Working together, the University of South Wales and the Perpetuity Academy have developed an MSc in International Security and Risk Management in what's a new approach towards combining academic theory and vocational knowledge.

There are a number of 'firsts' involved here. One is that the course content is authored by the Perpetuity Academy, with the course design and content overseen, approved and validated by the university. Throughout the course design, writing and accreditation process, the Perpetuity Academy and the University of South

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Wales worked hand in glove to ensure a qualification that reflects the aims and expertise of both parties.

This unusual approach to the authoring of the MSc content is made possible by the fact that the Perpetuity Academy has very close associations with academia. The managing director of the Perpetuity Academy has lectured in security and risk management at both Leicester and Loughborough Universities and has a long track record in combining theory and practice in both courses and qualifications.

Similarly, the Perpetuity Academy differs from the majority of training companies in that its trainers hold Master's degrees, and have worked in both academia and the spheres of commercial security and risk management.

The University of South Wales is no less innovative in the structure of its lecturing team, and the Faculty of Life Science and Education has an established reputation for its expertise and work in combining vocational expertise and academic content.

Another unique aspect of this MSc is that it's delivered through online distance learning, enabling learners to combine their studies with their work and to do so from anywhere in the world. To mitigate the fact that distance learning can be an isolated experience for some, learners are able to interact with each other and receive support from tutors through a specially designed virtual learning system which, in addition to the learning materials, includes forums and discussion groups.

Offering the course by way of online distance learning makes it accessible to those in employment, while at the same time affording it an international reach.

In line with this, the MSc course can also be studied either on a one year full-time basis or across two years part-time, making it accessible for those with different amounts of time available to commit to study.

In terms of content, the MSc again merges academic theory with security and risk management. The course consists of five modules – Security Management: Prevention and Design, Security Management: Risk Management and Loss Prevention, Strategic Security Management and Leadership, Security and Risk Management: Delivering Value and Research Methods – and a dissertation.



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