Strategies for Employer Engagement in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper explores perceptions and experiences of employer engagement (EE) within 10 UK higher education institutions. Findings indicate that: EE is core to the purpose of HE and always has been; the ‘student experience’ is a key driver for EE; the success of EE is dependent on putting appropriate support systems in place; workforce development is just one aspect of EE and not a priority for all HEIs; the involvement of academics is key to successful EE; EE requires culture change, but not of the kind often assumed; and achieving successful EE is a major leadership challenge for HE.

Presentation

Strategies for Employer Engagement in Higher Education

In this paper we report the findings of a research project designed to explore the ways in which HE institutions have engaged with the Employer Engagement (EE) agenda; how they articulate and promote their approach(es) to working with employers; how it fits alongside other HE missions; and key success factors.
Recent Policy Context

Whilst universities have long sought to establish strategic relationships with employers of all types, traditionally the main emphasis has been on optimising research output through knowledge transfer and applied research, with substantially less attention given to the provision of higher skills learning for people already in work (The Royal Society, 2008), or indeed the involvement of employers in developing HE provision. Business and community engagement, it could be argued, has been perceived as a ‘third stream’ mission to be carried out in addition to academic research and teaching for traditional undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) student groups (Hatakenaka, 2005). The core missions of HE can be presented as a triangle, with teaching as one corner, research another, and business engagement the third as illustrated in Figure 1 below. Various HE offerings can be positioned along is can be presented as a diagram in Figure 1 below. Various HE offerings can be positioned at different places along these three axes and a virtuous cycle connecting all three of them.

Figure 1 – Conceptualisation of core missions of Higher Education

In December 2003, the Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration, commissioned by the Labour government, stressed the economic need for a better flow of innovation and ideas between business and universities and urged the HE sector to engage more closely with employers in order to address a perceived mismatch between the need of industry and current provision. However, it was not really until the publication of the Leitch review in 2006 that serious attention was given to how HE providers could contribute in a significant way towards upskilling the nation’s workforce (DfES, 2006).

Leitch placed skills at the heart of economic policy and the drive to increase employment, productivity, economic performance and, ultimately, prosperity for all. It proposed a new ambitious agenda of at least 40% of the UK population of working age acquiring a higher-level qualification than they currently possess by the year of 2020. Given that around 70% of this workforce is already beyond the age of compulsory education, substantial attention is required as to how HEIs can more effectively target and engage such learners (DfES, 2006).

The Leitch review, backed by subsequent government policy, had become a major driver for change in the HE sector and encouraged providers to consider new and innovative ways of addressing employer skills needs. In effect, the intent was to bring about a shift from a supply to a demand-led market in which employers had a far greater say in what and how higher level skills were provided to the existing and future workforce. Such a shift posed substantial opportunities and challenges to the providers of HE and the businesses and organisations with whom they collaborated. Over the past couple of years, in the face of economic recession, the higher skills agenda has become perhaps even more significant, with various parties proposing that improved workplace skills will enhance the resilience of organisations and
individuals in adapting and responding to change and uncertainty. With this shift we are seeing an extension of the higher skills agenda from ‘upskilling’ to ‘reskilling’ (House of Commons, 2009), although under the new Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition it would appear that the agenda may be changing once again (see: http://nds.coi.gov.uk/content/Detail.aspx?ReleaseID=414467&NewsAreaID=2).

**What is Employer Engagement?**

Over the past few years the term ‘employer engagement’ has come to mean a number of different things within HE and remains a somewhat contested area. The Leitch review and its implementation plan have renewed interest in the issue of EE and have firmly associated it with ‘workforce development’ (usually through ‘work-based learning’) for people already in employment. From this perspective, as noted above, there has been much emphasis on ‘demand-led’ education whereby courses are adapted to the requirements of specific employers both in terms of content and mode of delivery (usually through flexible, ‘bite-sized’ learning, often in the workplace and/or outside of normal working hours). The call for demand-led provision has in part been addressed through the development of ‘foundation degrees’ with a strong vocational dimension preparing people for specific occupations and/or industries, and the increased involvement of HEIs in accrediting existing workforce development by employers and/or other training providers (see Bolden and Petrov, 2008).

In addition to the growth of educational provision for people already in work, in which many universities have long been engaged anyway (through continuing professional development (CPD), lifelong learning and vocational education, although not at the scale encouraged by government policy), EE carries a number of other connotations within HE and, in many cases, is regarded as a key strand of education and research strategy. In particular, universities have long regarded EE as a key element of ensuring student employability and a positive learner experience. With the introduction of fees for home students in England, reduction in maintenance grants and increasing international competition for high calibre entrants, the capacity of HEIs to demonstrate their contribution towards graduate employment prospects is a key requirement. Employability activities typically involve engaging with employers to secure student work experience/placements, work related input into the curriculum, and career development and recruitment activities.

Universities have also long engaged with employers for research activity – either through the provision of funding, access to research sites and/or the availability of specialist expertise/facilities. Postgraduate research study has also often included university-employer collaboration. Such research relationships can carry many benefits for both groups of organisations and remain a significant area in which HE can both influence and learn from what is occurring in the field of work. Knowledge Transfer through industrial/business research and consultancy is a further area that links EE to research and is an important area of consideration for many HEIs.

Examples of each of the areas of HE-EE mentioned above are summarised in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of engagement</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tr>
<td>Workforce development for people already in employment, including both ‘upskilling’ and</td>
<td>- Standard or bespoke courses</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Existing or development of new programmes</td>
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**Table 1 – Forms of employer engagement**

Within the current paper we take a broad view of EE, spanning all of the above areas, as described by the interviewees in our study. It is important to note, therefore, that our focus is wider than that within much of the recent policy documentation, the reason being to illustrate how a diversity of EE activity can mutually support one another (for full report on which this paper is based see Bolden et al., 2010).

**Methodology**

This paper is based on analysis of interviews within 10 English HEIs to explore their approach(es) to EE. Participating institutions were selected to offer a broad cross-section of institutional types and profiles. Sample institutions were spread across England and covered a wide range of types and missions - five were post 1992 universities, four pre-1992 universities and one a university college11. Institutions ranged in size from under 4,000 to over 30,000 students, with a varying mix of undergraduate, postgraduate and part-time students.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with between 3-5 key informants within each institution who were able to give an institution-level perspective on EE. Whilst the roles and titles of interviewees varied between sites they included senior level institutional leaders (e.g., Vice-Chancellor, Pro-Vice-Chancellor), senior and middle level professional services managers (e.g., Director of Research and Enterprise, Director of Business Development, Director of Graduate Employment), heads of academic units (e.g., Dean of Faculty/School), heads of CPD and Executive Education units, and business liaison staff (e.g., Business Relations managers).

Within each institution at least one academic and one professional services representative was interviewed. Interviewees were identified via consultation with a senior-level contact within each HEI, as well as asking for recommendations from other interviewees. All interviews were conducted between June and October 2009 and were supplemented by information from the institution’s strategic plan; teaching, learning and research strategies; and website.

**Findings**

Findings from ten institutional case studies have been grouped under five main headings: the strategic purpose of EE; supporting and resourcing EE; structures for teaching and learning; communicating and embedding an EE approach; and changing contexts for EE. The first of
these sets of issues can be considered as the bedrock/foundations of EE within an HEI; the next three as supporting columns; and the last one as the roof and future direction (see Figure 2 below). Each of these will now be discussed in more detail.

Figure 2 Summary of findings

**Strategic purpose of EE:** Findings indicate that active engagement with employers is regarded as contributing positively to all forms of education (not just CPD and workforce development) and as forming a key pillar of the student experience and employability. EE is also regarded as integral to research, offering access to research sites, funding, dissemination, knowledge transfer and impact. HEIs, however, regard their relationships with employers as broader than simply ‘business’. They see public sector and third sector employers as key players as well as the private sector. EE is also about the wider community and social contribution of HE, not just meeting the skills needs of employers.

**Supporting and resourcing EE:** In terms of supporting and resourcing EE there was a recognised need for EE to be promoted as a priority from the very top of the institution, yet integrated across a range of roles and functions to ensure wide scale engagement, endorsement and support. Successful EE requires a variety of centralised and decentralised support functions to absorb the increased administrative workload that EE initiatives tend to generate, as well as building and supporting relationships with employers, assessing employer needs and tailoring learning solutions to meet their requirements. Personal relationships between academics and employers are key to successful collaboration, however, and should be supported rather than replaced by institutional support functions. In order to meet the needs of employers HEIs may need to become more ‘business like’ in how they cost and resource EE activity in order to remain competitive and to ensure the long-term sustainability and viability of initiatives. Greater flexibility is required in planning, staffing and financial systems as well as the development of strategic relationships with other organisations (such as FEC, private providers, professional associations, etc.).

**Structures for teaching and learning:** In looking at the impact of EE on teaching and learning our findings indicate that it is important to recognise that engaging employers with HE is much broader than just tailoring courses for people already in work. Whilst some HEIs are not entering the workforce development market to a significant degree, all are greatly strengthening the work experience and employability of their students, and working closely with employers to achieve this. Increasingly the role of EE in teaching and learning is
impacting on all areas of provision through the involvement of employers in curriculum design, course delivery, career guidance, work experience and student placements. There is also a widely recognised need for more flexible and responsive approaches to higher level skills accreditation. The increasing emphasis on accrediting and recognising prior learning, however, carries substantial implications for programme administration, recruitment and progression; and the expansion and diversification of the student body places new demands on student support services.

Communicating and embedding EE: It can be useful to see EE not in terms of different activities but in terms of building different relationships with employers. Some HEIs are looking for wide-ranging links with a limited number of large employers; others want to work with many employers. Some are working with global companies whereas others with local firms or regional economies. The issue here is how to build and maintain these relationships. EE is also seen as a way in which HEIs can differentiate themselves and create a strong external brand. However, employers and other stakeholders (e.g., learners) need to understand what offers lie behind the brand. There is also a need for messages to be clear inside the institution. The top team need to help all staff understand what they really mean by ‘employer engagement’ and how big a change in the institution they are expecting. If significant change is required, it may help to use concepts of change management in implementing an EE strategy. Universities have not always been very good at having discussions and reaching clear agreements about individual and collective priorities and this is probably the most important aspect of culture change required by EE – and it is a change in ways of working not specifically in attitudes to employers. Progress is being made in recognising the work academic staff do in EE through supporting them better and giving them time or money for such activities. A major unresolved issue is whether academics who actively support the EE agenda will find their endeavours are also recognised in HE promotion systems.

Changing contexts for EE: The key issue here is the extent to which EE within HEIs should be regarded as an evolving journey in which institutions have always aimed to address the needs of employers and society, yet adapted their approaches and positioning over time to meet changing academic, political and market requirements. Government supported initiatives for the promotion of EE in HE (e.g., HEFCE Innovation Fund and Higher Level Skills Pathfinder Projects) have been used by some as a stepping stone for significant development and/or restructuring of EE activity. Whilst they have been useful in developing capacity, however, some questions remain about the long-term financial sustainability of structures and employer demand for higher education provision. HE-EE and the changing market for higher-level qualifications placing increasing demands on HEIs to collaborate in partnerships with other organisations and this shift carries a number of new and significant challenges for leadership of, within, and between organisations. Besides, a variety of strands of EE activity, in particular demand for executive education, CPD and tailored programmes, has been negatively affected by the economic recession. In no case, however, was the downturn seen as an excuse for reducing EE, on the contrary, during this period HEIs were looking to retain and grow employer relationships through an expansion of the various ways in which they could collaborate.

In terms of their future plans and aspirations, all HEIs in our study were looking to extend their EE activity although mass CPD and workforce development remains a significant priority in only a minority of institutions. In many cases a changing relationship with students was anticipated in which they would increasingly be regarded as ‘partners’ rather than ‘customers’. Within this environment, as indicated earlier, the ‘student experience’ was considered of central importance, along with the ‘impact’ and contribution of research.
Discussion and Conclusions

Considering each institution as a separate case study we have identified a number of key lessons and points for consideration. Below we summarise these:

- EE is core to the purpose of HE and always has been;
- The ‘student experience’ is a key driver for EE within all types of HEI;
- The success of EE is dependent on putting appropriate support systems in place;
- Workforce development is just one aspect of EE and not a priority for all HEIs;
- The involvement of academics is key to successful EE;
- EE requires culture change, but not of the kind so often assumed;
- Achieving successful EE is a major leadership challenge for HE.

Recognition of these issues is important both for those people with HE charged with outreach activities, as well as policy makers and those responsible for supporting and engaging with the HE sector. Whilst the current research is focused on English HEIs, similar challenges are faced elsewhere.

To conclude, it is perhaps worth taking a moment to consider the implications of these findings for those people within HE, and the organisations that support it, that are responsible for HE-EE activity. Overall our findings demonstrate the value of growing EE activity organically – building on successes, areas of strength, reputation and individual and institutional interests and values. Whilst senior level endorsement is clearly important for promoting and supporting EE activity, it needs to foster and nurture initiatives from the ground upwards rather than impose or drive through change in a top-down fashion. A clarity and consistency of message of what forms of EE the HEI seeks to encourage, the types of organisation it seeks to work with, and the manner in which this type of activity will be supported and recognised within the institution, is incredibly helpful, however, in enabling staff within HEIs to prioritise which types of activity to focus their attention on.

Senior level leaders can do a great deal to support and resource EE activity and need to communicate the value of this activity in ways that connect to academic and institutional missions. Positioning EE as part of a longer history of engaging with communities and society is helpful in clarifying that it is not just ‘the latest fad’ but an enduring pillar of HE. Indeed, the current emphasis on EE within policy debates, and the associated lure of funding, may offer an opportunity for institutions to reassert and revisit their legacy and origins. In so doing, however, one must be careful not simply to add it as just another item on the ‘to do list’ but as an activity that is entwined and embedded in the existing work of academics and their institutions.

If EE is an evolving and expanding area of activity it is likely that the direction in which organisations end up heading will arise through an interaction between bottom-up emergent processes and top-down strategic direction. Senior level leaders need to remain alert to these processes if they seek to create an organisation that is truly responsive to changing market needs and to build on areas of strength. We might expect, however, that over time as the focus on EE matures, that institutions become better at articulating both what they won’t do as well as what they will do, and that this balance will differ between HEIs.

One area where confusion may arise is in the extent to which EE is associated with CPD and workforce development activities. Much of the policy literature of recent years appears to have reinforced the sense that these are indeed the main forms of EE and areas in which institutions should be focussing their efforts. The findings from our study, however,
demonstrate that to a moderate degree these remain peripheral and optional activities (although in no case did an HEI feel it was possible to do away with them entirely). By equating EE with CPD and workforce development it can appear to be a ‘third stream’ activity to be balanced alongside the core missions of teaching and research. If, however, we consider the delivery of CPD and workforce development as a somewhat separate activity that institutions can engage with more or less vigorously, and that they may well put in place different structures to support (e.g. delivery partnerships with FE and/or the private sector; flexible accreditation frameworks; separate administrative support teams), then it becomes possible to reconceptualise EE as at the very heart of the mission of HE. This is not to propose that universities either should or could not engage more actively in the development of people for their working lives – indeed this remains a priority within all of them – but that benefits will arise mainly from an increasing assimilation, where appropriate, of this into their core activities of teaching and research rather than vice-versa. Many institutions, and academics, remain rightly wary of going too far down the route of ‘employer-focussed’ activity if there is a sense that it may take them away from their role as an impartial education provider that develops people for their life and careers - wherever that may take them.

If we revisit Figure 1 at the beginning of the paper and compare that conceptualisation of HE core missions with the accounts given to use by institutional actors for this particular research we would see a high degree of integration of EE into the core teaching and research missions of HE, with perhaps the exception of CPD and workforce development which although linked to other activities may well have its own separate systems and processes and vary in its level if priority within the institution. To this extent, based on our own data, we saw the situation more like the image in Figure 3 below.

![Figure 3 Alternative conceptualisation of Employer Engagement](image)

The recent debate about HE-EE is an entree to a much larger debate about the role and purpose of HE in society. These are not easy questions to answer and may evoke a wide range of views and responses. They are important questions to consider, however, and through dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders it may become possible to enhance the profile and relevance of the HE sector to society as a whole. Commercial businesses are clearly an essential group to engage in these discussions but they are not the only one. Inputs are also required from the public and non-profit sectors, from learners and the communities in which they reside, from policy makers, and from the academics and other professionals who work within or alongside the HE sector. HEIs clearly have a responsibility to meet the needs of their constituents but this will require difficult decisions about how to use their finite resources, as illustrated in the following quote from the Work Foundation (2008:1):
Universities, at the heart of the UK’s growing knowledge economy, are facing unprecedented challenges. Tasked not only with educating students, whose expectations of education is changing, and with producing cutting-edge internationally recognised research, universities are also being asked to work with local communities and collaborate with businesses. Yet these are significant calls on finite resources and questions need to be raised about how universities and their leaders can best respond to the challenges they are now facing.

For universities and employers to truly collaborate, deep running reciprocal relationships are required. The key to successful partnerships is developing a relationship based on mutual respect and understanding. Universities, employers and other organisations with an interest in the development of a high-skills economy must take time to get to know one another – to develop an appreciation of the unique contribution of (and pressures on) each partner and what each partner could do to facilitate better working relations. Such understanding is dependent on finding opportunities for discussion, reflection and the sharing of experience within and between stakeholders. Whilst it would seem that in the current climate a huge amount of effort is being directed towards making universities adapt and respond more effectively to the demands of employers (largely through government-controlled incentives and penalties) far less attention is given to encouraging employers to seriously consider the social and ethical (as well as commercial) imperatives to develop and support their employees. Culture change cuts both ways, as does genuine collaboration.

If the ‘credit crunch’ and subsequent recession have taught us anything it’s that all our futures are linked – that abusive and self-serving practices within one part of society have a knock-on effect across the whole system. It is true perhaps, that at times the HE sector can seem rather inward-looking, risk averse and/or elitist, but similar criticisms can be targeted elsewhere. The next few years will be key in determining the future direction of our universities and their ability to deliver the kinds of contribution expected of them. As institutions with roots that lead right to the heart of our societies (in terms of the arts, science, education, etc.) their future is of significance to all of us and their success dependent on developing a shared and sustainable understanding of their place within society – neither ivory towers nor skills factories!

References:

1 In proposing the contribution of HE to meeting the skills needs of employers it is important to clarify precisely which part of the skills market HE is best able to address. Higher education, as its name would imply, is specifically focussed on developing ‘higher level skills’ – that is training and development at Certificate of Higher Education level or above. Typically, HE provision is at National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 4 or above, be that as a standalone course or part of a larger programme of study (such as a UG degree or PG certificate, diploma, masters or doctorate).

2 The pre/post 1992 distinction is commonly used to distinguish between traditional universities and ex-polys that were awarded university status in 1992, along with university colleges and other institutions that have gained university status subsequently. The latter institutions have tended to have a more vocational orientation than traditional universities and are more heavily involved in the mass delivery of HE programmes.


4 The recent BIS (2009) report appears to have begun to redress this situation and espouses a broader view of EE in HE.


