Employer Engagement with Higher Education:

Defining, Sustaining and Supporting Higher Skills Provision

A Higher Skills Research Report for
HERDA South West and HEFCE

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Executive Summary

1. This report summarises the findings from analysis of 27 case studies of HE-employer engagement initiatives, particularly those targeted at upskilling people in or entering the workforce. From examination of these cases it is concluded that **the nature of HE-employer engagement is very diverse**, covering a wide range of offerings, from major new ventures; through enhancing existing programmes; the provision of bespoke courses, workshops and seminars; to the assessment or accreditation of in-company learning. This diversity highlights the **complexity of the higher skills market both in terms of the forms of engagement sought by employers as well as the variety of approaches from HEIs to meeting these needs.**

2. The **main drivers** for employers to engage with HE in such initiatives are to improve the supply of graduates and enhance productivity and/or ways of working. Additional drivers include widening access through lifelong learning; helping to create and apply new knowledge; developing enterprise and encouraging innovation; and motivating staff and building/ strengthening relationships with business. **Many employers are looking to HE for a long-term relationship that goes beyond regarding them as simply another training provider** and many HEIs are looking to establish similar relationships with employers. HE-employer engagement, it seems, is just that: a collaborative relationship between HEIs and employers. From our cases it can be seen that employers are often active partners in learning provision, through providing work experiences and/or teaching inputs, and should not just be regarded as customers for HE products.

3. From analysis of the cases in this report, the HE offer to employers varies along a number of axes including **level** (from access/ entry to HE to advanced and higher degrees), **'bespokeness'** (the extent to which provision is tailored to specific employer needs), **accreditation** (including unaccredited and experiential learning), and **scale and intensity** (in terms of the duration and depth of programmes and relationships). The evidence from our case studies indicates a degree of **differentiation between HEIs along these axes and an advantage in institutions to playing to their strengths.**

4. In exploring the manner in which HE-employer engagement initiatives develop, and may expand to incorporate additional stakeholders, we can discern six main **models of engagement**: direct, HE network/partnership, employer group, HE-employer consortium, sub-contracted and mediated. It is not possible to recommend a 'best practice' model, as **the approach needs to be adapted to the context and success is determined by a wide range of factors.**

5. A number of **facilitators and barriers** to effective HE-employer engagement are identified, including: strategic fit for the HEI and its partners; finding partners and establishing the relationship; designing and delivering an appropriate learning package; developing, sustaining and leading the partnership; staff resourcing and capability; culture and systems supportive of collaboration; funding and investment. These can be clustered under three main headings: **defining and focussing engagement; sustaining the collaboration effort; and supporting engagement.** These factors are presented diagrammatically in the figure below.
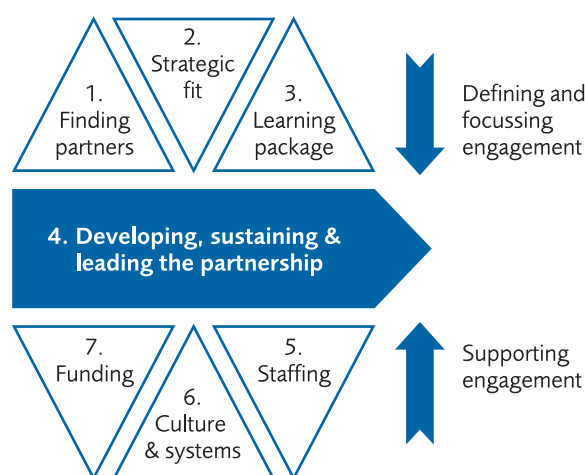
6. The research evidence indicates that a range of different actors impact upon the higher skills agenda and subsequent nature of HE-employer engagement. Amongst these, a key group are policy makers who put in place funding, quality assurance and reporting structures for the HE sector. **Shifting government priorities** in the face of changes to the economy and national and regional policy have an impact upon the way(s) in which HEIs engage with employers and the long-term sustainability of initiatives. One change since publication of the Leitch report in 2006 has been a shift in emphasis from 'upskilling' towards 'reskilling', in response to job losses within at risk sectors.

7. The report concludes with a number of **recommendations** about how HEIs and their partners can enhance the quality and effectiveness of their engagement with employers. These include identifying project 'champions'; establishing appropriate management and communication structures; engaging academic interest and input; working with brokers and intermediaries; taking a long-term view; and articulating a clear, coherent and integrated strategy for employer engagement that connects to the other core missions of teaching and research in HE. Ultimately, however, **employer engagement places an increasing demand on HEIs to collaborate in multi-organisational partnerships in the design and delivery of educational provision.** This, it is argued, is a major leadership challenge for both individual institutions and the sector as a whole and requires institutions to reflect upon, articulate and communicate a consistent and integrated approach to meeting their organisational missions, as indicated below.
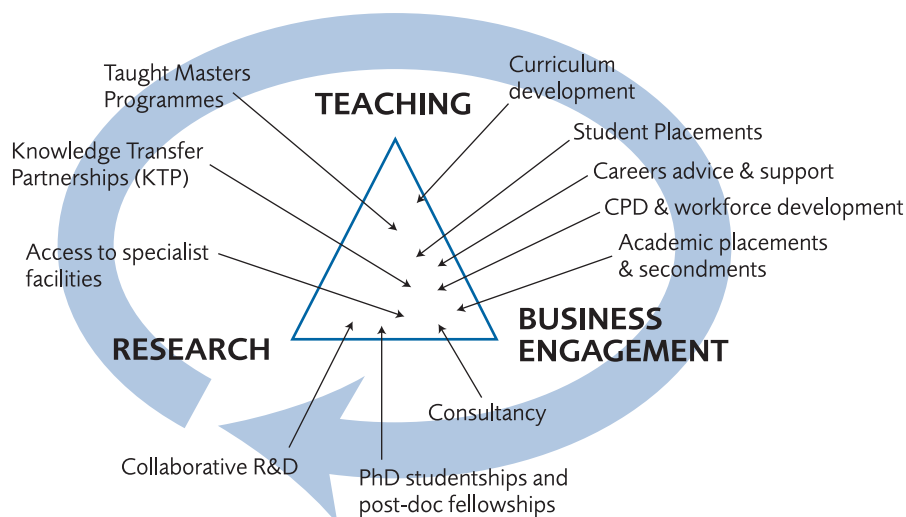
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1. Introduction

1.1   About this report

This report draws on findings from research by the South West Higher Level Skills Pathfinder Project[1] and the Council for Industry in Higher Education[2] to explore ways in which higher education (HE) institutions can engage more effectively with employers in the development and delivery of vocationally orientated higher skills provision.

The aim of this report is to highlight how different forms of employer engagement (in particular workforce development) can contribute in a positive way towards the strategic aims of different HE institutions (HEIs). The target audience are people who have been charged with the task of expanding and/or improving the quality of HE-employer engagement. These people may be employed directly by HEIs (e.g. business and relationship development managers, knowledge transfer officers, academic deans, pro-vice chancellors (PVCs), etc.) or through organisations/initiatives that seek to collaborate with and/or support HE (e.g. HE Regional Development Agencies (such as HERDA South West), HE funding councils (such as HEFCE), Business Link, Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), etc.).

Whilst the report is informed by empirical research it is intended primarily to stimulate reflection on how employer engagement can be aligned with the strategic orientation of the HEI in relation to the higher skills market. Much of the technical detail of case studies and methodologies are available through additional documents in the public domain (see section 1.3.2).

The report begins with a brief **introduction** to the higher skills agenda in HE, the expansion of employer engagement activity, and the methodology and structure of the report. The next section highlights the various **types of HE-employer engagement** in terms of key drivers, what is being offered, forms of accreditation, scale and intensity, and how the focus of provision varies between institutions. The following section explores different **forms of engagement** in terms of the key partners/stakeholders and the ways in which they work together. Together, these two sections use the case study evidence to map out the landscape of HE-employer engagement and the complexity of the higher skills market. The next section draws on findings from the case studies to explore the main **facilitators and barriers to effective engagement.** Many of these factors are inter-related, overlapping such that it is not possible to highlight consistent evidence of 'best practice' but rather a list of key issues for consideration. The factors are grouped under three main themes: (1) defining the focus of engagement activity; (2) sustaining the collaboration effort; and (3) supporting development activity. These same factors are revisited in the final chapter on **enhancing HE-employer engagement** to raise some key questions and points for consideration for HEIs, and their partners, looking to engage more effectively with employers.

Fundamentally this report aims to help clarify the nature of the higher skills market and how different HEIs can position themselves in relation to this. It is intended more as a reflection tool for those people directly involved in developing and supporting employer engagement in HE rather than as a good practice guide or detailed description of research findings. It is also just one of a number of outputs of the South West Higher Skills research project and will be followed later this year by subsequent publications[3].

1.2   Higher Skills and Employer Engagement

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[4] or indeed the involvement of employers in developing HR 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[5] (see Figure 1).

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1   Higher Level Skills Pathfinder Projects (HLSPP) were initiated within three regions of the UK in 2007 through funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to explore and embed effective strategies for HE providers to engage and collaborate with employers in the development of workforce skills. For further details please see www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/employer/path.

2   The CIHE aims to foster more effective relationships between HE and employers so that world-class learning and research can improve the international competitiveness of both sectors and the capabilities of graduates and those already in the workforce. For further details see www.cihe-uk.com.

3   For further details and updates please visit www.herda-sw.ac.uk.

4   Royal Society (2008) *A Higher Degree of Concern*, Policy document, London: The Royal Society.

5   Hatakenaka, S. (2005) *Development of Third Stream Activity: lessons from international experience*. Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute.
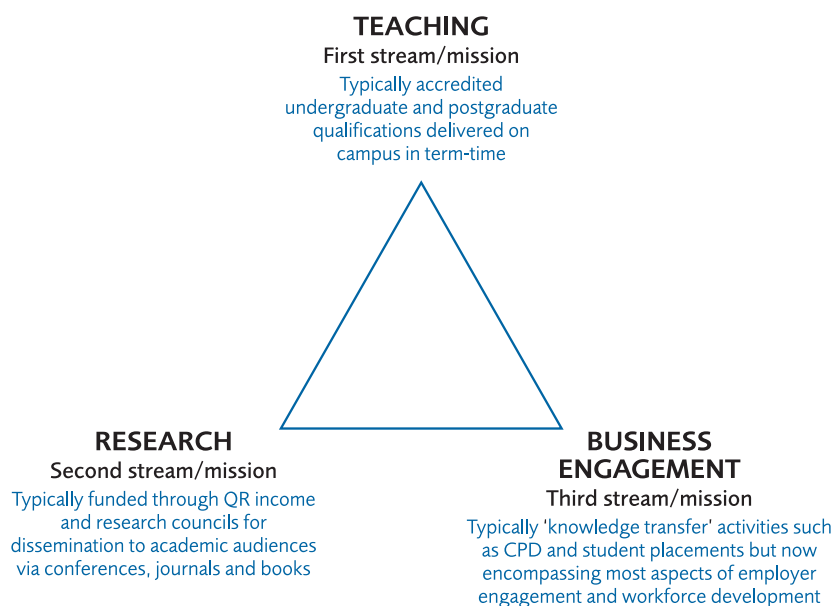
TEACHING
First stream/mission
Typically accredited
undergraduate and postgraduate
qualifications delivered on
campus in term-time

RESEARCH
Second stream/mission
Typically funded through QR income
and research councils for
dissemination to academic audiences
via conferences, journals and books

BUSINESS
ENGAGEMENT
Third stream/mission
Typically 'knowledge transfer' activities such
as CPD and student placements but now
encompassing most aspects of employer
engagement and workforce development

Figure 1 – The Missions of Higher Education

Since the first government White Paper on Skills in 2003[6] increasing emphasis has been placed on encouraging businesses and universities to work together although it was not really until the publication of the Leitch report in 2006[7] that serious attention was given to how HE providers can contribute in a significant way towards upskilling the nation's workforce.

The Leitch agenda, backed by subsequent government policy, has become a major driver for change in the HE sector and is encouraging providers to consider new and innovative ways of addressing employer skills needs. In effect, the intent is to bring about a shift from a supply to a demand-led market in which employers have a far greater say in what and how higher level skills are provided to the existing and future workforce. Such a shift posses substantial opportunities and challenges to the providers of HE and the businesses and organisations with whom they collaborate. Over the past year, 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'[8].

1.2.1   The landscape of employer engagement

Despite the breadth of activity that could be considered as 'employer engagement', for the purposes of this review the primary focus is on developing links between HE providers and employers for **workforce development**, particularly through **work-based learning** (WBL). Furthermore, whilst HEIs clearly already cater to some extent to the needs of employers and people in work through standardised programmes (such as the MBA and off-the-shelf CPD courses), the primary emphasis of this review is on **demand-led provision** incorporating some form of active engagement on behalf of the employer, be it in the design stage, funding and/or delivery[9].

The reason for this focus is that this is where much of the political drive is currently being directed – into upskilling the current workforce – although, undoubtedly 'employer engagement' can be conceptualised as a far broader activity encompassing a diverse range of 'knowledge transfer' activities including student placements, graduate recruitment, applied research, outreach and the dissemination of research-based knowledge.

6   DfES (2003) *21st Century Skills: Realising our Potential.* London: Department for Education and Skills.

7   Leitch, S. (2006) *Prosperity for All in the Global Economy.* London: Department for Education and Skills.

8   House of Commons (2009) *Re-skilling for recovery: After Leitch, implementing skills and training policies. First Report of Session 2008–09.* London: House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee.

9   HEFCE (2006a) *Engaging Employers with Higher Education: HEFCE strategy to support links between higher education and employers on skills and lifelong learning.* London: Higher Education Funding Council for England.

In positioning 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 level or above (post-compulsory education level). 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). Higher level skills can also include professional qualifications (accredited through an industry or trade body) of an equivalent academic level and foundation degrees. Skills can be acquired through a variety of mechanisms (short or long courses, classroom or work based, etc.) and may not necessarily lead to a qualification. Provision may be offered in part or full by universities, FE colleges, private providers and employers' in-house training facilities.

In summary, therefore, for the purpose of this review, we use the definition from King[10] which considers "higher level" learning as broadly equivalent to the first year of an undergraduate degree (NFQ Level 4) and above and covering a range of provision from non-accredited CPD through foundation degrees to postgraduate and professional qualifications. It may also include small chunks of learning delivered in a flexible format, not specifically validated by a university. In particular our attention is focussed on workforce development, defined as "the upskilling and reskilling of an organisation's employees".

1.3   Research basis for this report

1.3.1   Higher Skills and CIHE case studies

This report draws on the findings of a series of case studies of HE-employer engagement conducted by the South West Higher Skills project and the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) to identify key themes and issues emerging from workforce development initiatives[11]. Whilst these two studies were conducted independently there are a number of commonalities and complementarities that make it worthwhile analysing them together. In particular both were conducted around the same time (2007-2008) and sought to identify good practice in HE-employer engagement in England. There were, however, a number of significant differences that are also worth considering when viewing the findings:

-    the Higher Skills cases were focussed specifically on provision by HEIs in the South West of England, whilst the CIHE cases looked at examples of innovative or effective practice nationally;

-    the Higher Skills cases focussed specifically on provision in the creative and cultural industries, engineering and 'business improvement' (primarily leadership and management), whilst the CIHE cases focussed on construction, engineering, financial/business services, IT and creative industries/media;

-    the initial point of access to case studies, and their identification, was via HEIs for the Higher Skills project, whereas the CIHE accessed cases initially through approaching employers;

-    about half of the Higher Skills case studies were based on Development Fund[12] projects that sought to create new provision whereas the CIHE cases tended to focus on employer-funded provision;

-    in the light of the previous two points, many of the Higher Skills cases were conducted during the development phase of initiatives (occasionally before any provision had been made) whereas CIHE cases tended to focus on established provision that may well have been in place for some time. CIHE case studies were also mostly at UG and PG levels whereas several of the Higher Skills cases were based on foundation degrees (i.e. entry to HE).

10   King, Madeleine (2007) Workforce Development: how much engagement do employers have with higher education? London: CIHE. URL: www.cihe-uk.com/publications.php.

11   For further details on the CIHE study see: Connor, H. and Hirsh, W. (2008) *Influence through Collaboration: Employer Demand for Higher Learning and Engagement with Higher Education.* London: CIHE. URL: www.cihe-uk.com/publications.php.

12   This was a fund made available to South West HEIs as part of the Higher Skills Pathfinder project for the development of new, demand-led provision in direct response to specified employer needs. For further details see: http://www.herda-sw.ac.uk/currentprojects/HigherSkills/DevelopmentFund/tabid/207/Default.aspx

1.3.2   Research methodology

As indicated, in the South West case studies were compiled as part of the South West Higher Skills project. Data was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with key informants from HEI(s), employer(s) and other partner(s) over a period of up to 18 months. The intent of these cases was to get a 'behind the scenes' appreciation of the perceptions and experiences of different parties over time. Cases varied in length and detail although, on average, at least three interviews were conducted so as to enable some degree of triangulation of findings. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and used as the basis for individual case study write ups with the following sub-headings:

-   Methods for case study

-   Project partners

-   Context and background to the project

-   Brief description of project

-   Funding

-   Project leadership, roles and management

-   Motivations for the partners' involvement

-   Development of the project

-   Delivery of the project

-   Factors supporting the project

-   Challenges

-   Benefits

-   Future activities and sustainability

Due to the confidential nature of interviews and the possibility of identifying informants from the case study information it is not possible to make these individual reports publicly available, however, they have been used as a primary source for subsequent analysis[13].

The CIHE study followed a very similar procedure, although over a shorter time period, and lead to the production of a book of published case studies[14] as well as some additional, confidential information on specific initiatives.

The analysis and interpretation of these cases for the current report was conducted through a collaborative process of engagement between key members of the CIHE and Higher Skills research teams in which cases were shared and discussed collectively prior to summary and review under several key headings led by specific individuals. In total 27 different case studies of HE-employer engagement were drawn on in this stage of the research and together form the empirical basis for this report. They are listed in Table 1, along with the coding labels that will be utilised when referring to them.

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13   Condensed versions of some of these and other case studies from the South West Higher Skills project can be found at http://www.herda-sw.ac.uk/currentprojects/HigherSkills/HigherSkillsPublications/tabid/182/Default.aspx.

14   CIHE case studies can be downloaded from www.cihe-uk.com/docs/0809CollabCaseStudies.pdf.

Higher Skills Case Studies	CIHE Case Studies
1) BAE Systems and University College of St Mark and St John: English language training for engineers	A) BAE Systems and Loughborough University: systems engineering long term partnership
2) Culture South West and University of Exeter: a tailored development programme for cultural sector leaders	B) Microsoft and HE: a strategic and segmented company approach to HE engagement
3) First Milk and the Royal Agricultural College: a training academy for members of a large dairy co-operative	C) Constructionarium: Imperial College, London and John Doyle Construction: undergraduate field course as part of degree
4) Flybe, Exeter College and the University of Exeter: a foundation degree in leadership and management	D) Pricewaterhouse Coopers and Newcastle University Business School: bespoke programme designed to provide an enhanced pool of accountancy recruits
5) South West Food and Drink, Dutchy College and University of Plymouth: a series of four accredited courses in food preparation and management.	E) American Express Technologies and University of Sussex: masters degree coupled with work experience on a campus facility
6) Devon and Cornwall Constabulary and University of Exeter: training on Islam and Muslim Culture for family liaison officers	F) University of Sussex Informatics and small IT companies: ex-students forming a natural bridge between academia and business
7) University of Gloucestershire and local SMEs: 'Innovation Through Jazz' course for small and micro employers	G) Accenture and Lancaster University Management School: Accenture delivering module of MSc in IT
8) LymeNET, South West Lifelong Learning Network and Open University: online HE taster sessions for local employers	H) Atkins and Greenwich University: sponsoring Chair, research links and advice, staff lecture on courses
9) Plymouth County Council Children's Services, University of Plymouth and Open University: development of a 'qualifications escalator' for children's services staff	I) Airbus and NEWI/Deeside: Higher apprenticeship in Engineering Technology working at Airbus
10) Wessex Water, University of the West of England and Pentachoron: development of video-pod learning courses for water treatment scientists	J) RBS and Cranfield University: Manager leadership programme
11) Airbus and University of Bath: accreditation of in-company training provision on the use of composite materials in the aerospace industry	K) Logica plc and University of Winchester: work-based learning as an alternative recruitment channel; Management (IT) foundation degree, with paid salary.
12) Wiltshire and Swindon County Sports Partnership, Sports England and University of Exeter: a leadership in partnership programme for sports and community managers	N) Legal and General's Underwriting Academy at Cardiff University: a bespoke programme for delivering a specialist skill set to a group of professional underwriting staff
	O) First11 Design and Newcastle College: an SME in creative industries and a local college
	P) BBC and Liverpool John Moores University: conference, staff links each institution college, live projects etc.
	Q) North West Media Network: a regional consortium of HEIs and employers

Table 1 – Case Studies used in this Report

2. Types of HE-Employer Engagement

2.1 Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of key themes arising in our case study examples in terms of what they tell us about the nature of HE-employer engagement. The case study examples are referred to as letters or numbers, and correspond to those shown in Table 1. Further discussion of who has been involved in the different models of engagement arising from the case studies, and the roles and relationships of the people involved, is in the next chapter

Previous research has shown the heterogeneity of the employer demand for higher learning and skills, and how differing requirements are met by different types of provision[15]. Universities historically have taken a relatively small share of the workforce development market, which is characterised by diversity and a range of other players (e.g. FE colleges, private training providers). But, as discussed in the introduction, HE is being encouraged to interact more actively with employers in specific workforce development activities in addition to its existing business engagement activities such as student placements and bespoke courses[16]. The scale and type of employer engagement with HEIs can vary enormously and the main focus may not be on HE delivering a specific learning activity but on developing opportunities for employees to access learning materials, HEIs assessing or accrediting in-house learning, or more informal linkages between employers and academic staff in research project work which may, in turn, influence the content/development of UG and PG curricula. Hence the reason why, in this chapter, we focus on elaborating on the notion of 'HE-employer engagement' to give an indication of the diverse array of forms that this activity may take.

Our case study examples illustrated most of the diverse range of possible HE-employer engagement activity which previous studies have highlighted[17]. For ease of discussion we have grouped the forms of engagement into four main clusters, as shown in Figure 2. Whilst these clusters are not set hard and fast and several of our case study examples fall into more than one category (for example, where new ventures were developed out of existing provision, as in some of the foundation degree development, this might be considered as either Group I or II), they do offer some clarity to what is a rather complex field.

I. Major new ventures with employers e.g. new foundation degrees, MSc programmes	II. Enhancing existing provision e.g. integrating work based modules into degree programmes
III. Short bespoke courses, workshops and seminars e.g. CPD, access to HE, forums (often unaccredited)	IV. Assessment or accreditation of in-company learning e.g. awarding academic credits for in-house provision

Figure 2 – Main Forms of Employer Engagement for Workforce Development

Each of these main forms of engagement can be offered at different levels, from pre-HE/access to HE through to degree level and higher study. And they can be distinguished also by a range of other variables which adds further to their diversity. These include:

-   **The 'what' that is being offered by HE:** is it a learning 'product' like a course; or something less tangible such as a 'service', the provision of expertise or some other form of relationship? And how bespoke is it to employers needs? What is its content?

15   Bolden and Petrov (2008) *Employer engagement with higher education: a literature review,* for the SW Higher Skills project, November 2008. URL: http://tinyurl.com/66r5ye.

16   See for example Hogarth, T., Winterbotham, M., Hasluck, C., Carter, K., Daniel, W.W., Green, A.E. and Morrison, J. (2007) *Employer and University Engagement in the Use and Development of Graduate Level Skills.* London: Department for Education and Skills. URL: www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR835A.pdf.

17   There are some omissions such as Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs). Also, the main focus is on HEIs rather than delivery of HE in FE, though a few of the case studies include FE colleges.

-   **Whether the learning is required to be accredited or not:** Traditionally, universities have been seen to be the main provider of higher level academic qualifications (BSc, MBA, etc), though they also have mostly offered short unaccredited CPD type courses to employers. They are increasingly able to offer small bites of learning in units of credit.

-   **The scale or intensity of the employer/employees engagement:** This can vary in how demanding the involvement is of staff in the business, and in the length and frequency of a learning activity.

But perhaps the most important factor shaping the nature of engagement is:

-   **What's driving it:** why are employers involved with HE and using it for their workforce development or for other purposes?

We will start by considering this aspect.

2.2   What are the main drivers of engagement?

Previous research has identified a number of strategic factors which have been driving the HE agenda on work-based learning[18] and on employer engagement[19] which we also saw in many of our case studies.

The main two drivers which we observed were:

1. **To increase supply of graduates or certain skills** where shortfalls have been identified at a regional or national level (e.g. in STEM[20]). Within our cases this was most apparent where new programmes were being developed (Group I type engagement) because a gap in provision or inadequacies in current supply was perceived by an individual employer or group of employers. It could be focused on meeting employer(s) own recruitment needs but in a few cases it was more related to the wider sector needs (e.g. in IT, construction or engineering). These included the development of a new MEng in systems engineering (case A) and a foundation degree for airline staff (case 4) where gaps in supply of skills were identified by the employers concerned. But it could also be met out of enhancing existing provision (Group II), for example in the practical field course introduced in a civil engineering degree programme (case C) to ensure that graduates developed skills and had relevant industrial experience, or the new foundation degree in IT and business (case K) which was developed out of an existing management degree and adapted to meet employer and employees' needs. In addition to general widening of the graduate recruitment pool, some employers clearly see benefits from building closer relationships with individual students through their involvement with teaching, placements and/or projects (e.g. case C).

2. **To improve productivity or ways of working:** This was the driver behind most of the workforce development programmes in our case studies, which could be in all four Groups in Figure 2. Examples here include: the English language courses for engineers (case 1), the management modules for farmers (case 3), the medical underwriting modules (case N), the cultural awareness programme (case 6) and the 'qualifications escalator' and access to open learning materials in a Local Authority (case 9). In these instances it was recognised that employees needed to develop a broader range of higher skills, gain new skills or were expected to work in different ways to meet a changing business environment, organisational changes or to move into new markets.

Other drivers were also evident, though less so than these two and usually in addition to one of them:

3. **To widen access through lifelong learning** (upskilling employees to Level 4+): in a few case studies, non-traditional learners were being encouraged to engage with HE as part of workforce development and so increasing HE participation by adults (a Leitch target). This driver was partly behind engagement activity in the higher apprenticeship programme in the aerospace company (case I), the Local Authority professional development scheme (case 9), and some foundation degrees (cases 4 and K), mostly Group I engagement.

4. **To help create and apply new knowledge** (or to exchange subject knowledge): this is where employer engagement with

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18   Nixon, I., Smith, K., Tafford, R. and Camm, S. (2006) Work-Based Learning: *Illuminating the Higher Education Landscape*. York: Higher Education Academy. URL: www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/Employability/employability692.

19   Connor, H. and Hirsh, W. (2008) *Influence through Collaboration: Employer Demand for Higher Learning and Engagement with Higher Education*. London: CIHE.

20   Science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

academics encourages the flow of knowledge (two-way) often at leading edges of research. It was seen in the example of a university's links to ex-postgraduate students in small IT firms (case B), in the offering of internships or student placements (cases B and O) and in the development of the video pod learning materials in microbiology (case 10), mostly Group II and III.

5. **To help develop enterprise and encourage innovation:** encouraging innovation among business leaders and improving enterprise and developing creativity among employees was clearly behind some of the engagement initiatives in our cases. It was more likely to be the unaccredited learning or more informal activity in Group III, for example: the innovation through jazz workshops for SMEs (case 7), the cultural leadership programme (case 2), and in the some of the activities of the NW Media Network to help self employed and micro businesses (case Q), some of which fell into Group IV.

6. **To motivate staff and build relationships:** in addition to developing the capability of employees, initiatives such as the cultural leadership programme (case 2) and community sports leadership programme (case 12) were designed to motivate and retain staff within particular employers and the sector more widely. In both cases there was also an additional motive of building and strengthening relationships between individuals and organisations in different parts of the sector to increase the potential for effective cross-sector partnerships.

2.3   What is being offered?

Moving on from the why to describe in more detail 'the what' that is being offered, many of the employer engagement examples in our studies were concerned with the delivery of fairly conventional learning by HE, such as a short course, or modules of a degree, often to a particular group of employees, or to meet a specific employer issue (see for example the courses in written English to engineers, case 1). These could be:

- stand alone (as in case 1);

- aggregated towards a qualification (as in case 3 where six modules in agricultural management could form a graduate diploma); or

- an integral part of a qualification (as in case C, the 5 day field course module taken as part of a civil engineering degree course).

This range of solutions demonstrates the flexibility of this kind of provision and forms a key part of the HE offering to employers. Other engagement activity came in the form of less formal or less conventional learning products, such as workshops, design and use of e- and open- learning materials, support in the workplace to promote HE progression pathways, and the organised links between SMEs and academic staff, for example:

- the jazz workshops for SMEs and micro-business to help stimulate innovative practice (case 7) and in programme for cultural leaders (case 2);

- the access to open learning materials and workplace support in a local authority to help give their employees more encouragement to progress to HE study (case 9);

- the video pod files to help scientific analysts access training in microbiology in their own time (case 10).

As before, these offers tended to be focused on a specific employee group, skill set or business issue. A third group were examples of less tangible or less structured engagement activity, such as:

- Case study F where academics maintained informal links with ex-students, mostly PhDs, working in local small firms in the IT software/systems sector. This provided the university with a source of up-to-date knowledge about industry developments which could be input to curriculum development (at PG and UG levels) as well as benefits for the SMEs involved in terms of recruitment and career development of postgraduates.

-     The presence of a micro-business's Managing Director on a Foundation degree (Fdeg) validating board and his encouragement to provide work placements, to ensure that the curriculum offered by HE and FE remained relevant to industry (case O).

-     A company's academic team working with a range of institutions to encourage the use of new software tools in degree teaching (case B).

Though seemingly lighter touch, and perhaps less demanding on employer/academic time, they were nevertheless influential in the way they brought an employer or employability dimension into the curriculum.

The case study examples showed that learning activity offered could be at a number of **levels**, though they tended to cluster around Levels 4-6. One pre-HE (so below level 4) example was an intervention aimed at a wide range of staff (many not professionally qualified including some with qualifications below Level 3) to encourage them to 'try out' open learning and raise aspirations towards HE study and beyond to professional practice (case 9). We also had an example which combined several levels, from 3-5 (NVQ level 3 in the workplace, and 4 and 5 in Foundation Degrees, see case I). The examples at the higher end (levels 7 and 8) were masters level courses and modules (as in cases A, E and N), and PhD internships offered by a major IT company (as in B).

In several case studies, the learning could be taken by a range of employees with different prior educational levels. For example, case 4's Foundation Degree (i.e. at Levels 4/5) was part of a wider staff learning and development programme for company staff and links with regional HE and FE institutions had been formed by the company for staff training at Levels 1 through to 7. But in most of our examples, the focus of the relationship was learning at Level 4 or above, aimed at specific groups, often managers (though they could hold different prior qualifications) and professionals (e.g. engineers, insurance underwriters, scientists)

Another important dimension of much of 'what' is being provided by HE to employers, especially for workforce development purposes, is its **'bespokeness'**. Frequently in our examples the requirement was for learning to be tailored for individual employers and/or employee requirements. But this was not seen in all of them and some were only seen as partially bespoke. The latter included examples which had evolved over time into partially open courses out of initially designed bespoke learning (in one case with additional support from the local regional development agency, see case A). Some were the reverse - tailored programmes developed out of existing open programmes, e.g.: from a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in accountancy and finance (case D); or from a Fdeg in management (case K); or from a Masters in Information Technology (IT) (as in case E). And some were 'hybrids' - programmes designed to meet an employer specification but the learning could be shared with other students, such as in the two masters programmes developed for a large financial services organisation which had non-company personnel participating as well (case E).

Some new programmes designed for a specific purpose or a group of people/businesses needed much more substantial development input than many others which were adapted from existing provision: e.g. the management modules developed for farmers needed considerable time spent in consultation with experienced dairy industry members (case 3), and similarly

the modules in medical underwriting developed for a leading insurance company were newly designed very specific university delivered products (case N).

The case studies illustrated the wide range of HE disciplines that are covered in developing employer engagement activity, although we did not have many in the more traditional academic disciplines (such as humanities) where there is less likely to be a long history of business engagement. The subjects and topics covered within our own cases included:

- Language skills and cultural awareness (cases 1, 2, 6)

- Leadership and management (cases 2, 3, 5, 12)

- Applied science (case 10)

- Media design and audio/visual technology (cases O, Q)

- Systems engineering and ICT (cases A, K, F, B, E)

- Finance, business, admin, customer service, enterprise (cases 4 , 7, 8, D, E, N, K)

- Engineering (civil, aeronautical) (cases 4 , 11, I, C)

- Social care and health (case 9)

Some covered more than one of these (e.g. IT and business).

Most of the case studies had a strong skills and knowledge core to them but also tended to include elements of personal or 'soft skill' development. In a few cases, a significant aspect was about building aspirations towards higher level study (e.g. cases 9 and I), using learning materials or developing more interest in open learning (and helping transition to HE) (cases 8 and 9) or finding out more about particular higher level pathways (case I).

2.4   Accreditation

Accreditation featured in approximately two thirds of our case studies. It was either the case that a qualification was a key element in their design from the outset, or that accreditation became part of their development over time. Accreditation was done usually through a particular institution, though the learning could be delivered by other institutions (as in case 3, where the six modules were being delivered by local providers across the region). Some programmes had developed initially as unaccredited learning, and had subsequently sought accreditation (e.g. medical underwriting modules in case N, and composite materials in case 11), in response to employers seeking a 'mark of quality' from the university. A number of institutions were trialling more flexible accreditation frameworks to meet the needs of learners and employers through combining learning experiences from more than one provider as well as experiential and work-based learning (see cases 3, 8, 10 and 11)[21].

We also had examples, however, where accreditation had not been sought and seemed inappropriate or undesirable by employers or employees (cases 2, 6, 7 and 12). The unaccredited learning offering could be advertised at PG or UG level but in some cases the level being delivered was not entirely clear as the focus was on specific company needs (e.g. cases 1 and 7) and the NQF levels used in education have less familiarity in companies. In particular, it was not always clear whether or what proportion of the learning was at level 4 and above[22] and in many cases a mix of learning levels catering to different organisational and individual needs was most appropriate (what we found ourselves referring to as 'no level' in our discussions).

Whilst accreditation is clearly a key concern for HEIs and policy makers, in order to meet various performance targets, employers tend to be more concerned with the content/process of the learning and may view accreditation as detracting from the appeal of engaging with HE should it be seen to dictate the learning process and/or outcomes.

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21   The development of a 'shell' accreditation framework for regional HEIs has been one of the initiatives within the South West Higher Skills project. For further details please see: http://www.herda-sw.ac.uk/currentprojects/HigherSkills/ShellFramework/tabid/195/Default.aspx.

22   For further elaboration on this argument see: Kewin, J., Casey, P. and Smith, R. (2008) *Known Unknowns: the demand for higher level skills from businesses,* CFE on behalf of East Midlands Universities Association.

2.5   Scale and Intensity

Yet another distinguishing feature of our examples was their different scales of operation and intensity of employer involvement. As already mentioned, some of the case studies were focused on short courses (of a few days) which were delivered as a one-off or on an occasional basis (e.g. case 6). Others comprised a series workshops or modules delivered over a year or more (cases 2, 12). Yet others were more substantial relationships (as in Group I) which were about developing with staff in the businesses whole new degree courses or modules, which were offered on an on-going basis (such as cases 3, 4, 5, 9, A, K and N), and so involved substantial discussions and inputs of time. Typically, though, numbers of learners on these were relatively small per company, though programmes which had been running for some years now had throughputs totalling 100 or more learners.

As indicated above at the start of this section, some of the examples could be described as fairly light touch or less demanding in the way the two sides (HE and employers) interacted, yet the influence of what this interaction produced could be significant for the individual company involved, sector or HEI . In other examples, including some not listed in Table 1 which we found had been less successful, a considerable amount of resource and energy had gone into developing a new joint venture which then attracted relatively small numbers of learners and so had minimal impact.

From analysis of the case studies in this report, and our involvement in a range of other HE-employer engagement initiatives, there was substantial evidence of initiatives and relationships developing over long periods of time – often from quite small beginnings. Likewise, larger initiatives often diminish to nothing if systems and processes are not put in place to sustain the relationship once a project has been completed. The role of relationship managers and intermediaries may well prove instrumental in maintaining ongoing relationships and future possibilities for collaboration.

2.6   Different kinds of HEI and business involvement

In this section, we describe the types of organisational partners – the HEIs and businesses taking part mainly but also any other bodies involved. Further discussion of the roles and relationships of the people within them and different models of engagement between HEIs and employers are presented in Chapter 4.

All types of HE providers featured in our examples, from research-intensive pre-92 universities to more teaching vocationally-orientated ones, including very new universities and also colleges of higher and further education. As will be discussed in Chapter 4 many of them took part in multi- institutional partnerships.

A general pattern could be seen in which kind of institution was more likely to be engaged in a particular type of activity with employers, although this pattern was not always clear or consistent. For example, as might be expected, the more vocational universities and colleges tended to be the ones involved in developing new foundation degrees or modules at levels 4 and 5 (e.g. cases K, I and 5) though in a few cases (such as case 4) a more traditional university was also involved where their specialist expertise (and profile) was needed (e.g. in the area of leadership).

Also, the more vocational universities and colleges tended to be the ones involved mostly in the development of training modules at Level 4 with employers (e.g. case 3), work-based learning (cases I and Q) and e-learning materials for use in the workplace (case 10).

The development of customised honours or masters degrees (Levels 6 and 7) were more likely to involve universities with an established reputation in the particular discipline being focused on (as in cases A, D and E).

Short courses tended to be run by institutions with specialist knowledge or experience in the particular area sought by employers, and these could be colleges (as in case 2), new universities (cases 1 and 5), or pre-92 ones (cases A and N).

Open learning materials came from the Open University in two cases (8 and 9) in partnership with local universities and/or colleges.

Non-accredited learning activity was offered by different types of institutions, for example a pre-92 university (cases 2, 6 and 12), a pre-92 in partnership with a specialist college (case 2) and a post-92 university (case 7).

The types of businesses involved in our examples were also broad and diverse in the range of sectors covered and sizes, although as both studies focussed on a limited number of sectors and forms of activity this is inevitably somewhat constrained (see Section 1.3 for further details). Industries covered by our case studies included private and public sectors, land-based and manufacturing industries, business services and commerce; and incorporated both large multinational firms, and SMEs and micro businesses.

Not unexpectedly, smaller firms took part in a distinctive way. The examples highlighted specific work with SMEs through offering them workshops (e.g. cases 2 and 7), encouraging them to take students on work placements (CIHE O), student mentoring by freelancers (case Q), maintaining links with ex-students working in SMEs (case F), and encouraging access of open learning materials (case 8). There were a few examples of more substantial forms of engagement with SMEs, such as developing new modules and courses for employees, but these tended to come via collaborative work in networks or via brokers (cases 3 and 5). By contrast most of our examples of more significant forms of engagement, such as the development of new or enhanced degree programmes, tended to involve individual large companies (e.g. cases 4, D, E and K).

2.7   Summary

This chapter has attempted, through the case study examples, to show the varied nature of HE-employer engagement. It is difficult to put the different engagement activities into a simple typology because of their diversity across a number of dimensions although grouping them as in Figure 2 provides an overview of the main types of offering we encountered. It is hoped that this chapter reveals how the landscape of engagement is wider than perhaps implied by the simple phrase 'HE-employer engagement' and that HEIs have various opportunities and approaches open to them. This diversity theme is taken forward in the next chapter where the various forms of engagement are discussed and a number of models of partnership identified, which may also help determine which approach an HEI might choose to take to employer engagement in different circumstances.

3. Forms of Engagement

3.1 Introduction

As noted in Chapter 3, the scale and type of engagement varies enormously between initiatives, making it difficult to categorise case studies into a simple typology. If the previous chapter focused on types of engagement the focus of this chapter is on who is involved, what roles various actors play and how this process takes place over time. Whilst fully appreciating the diversity and complexity of HE-employer engagement we have made an attempt in this chapter, based on our case studies, to categorise them under six broad models of engagement. However, this is not to suggest that these six models are exhaustive or necessarily the most effective, but that they capture much of the diversity in terms of the forms partnerships may take, the people and organisations involved, and their various roles and functions. These six models are mapped diagrammatically in Figure 3 and are described in turn in this chapter.
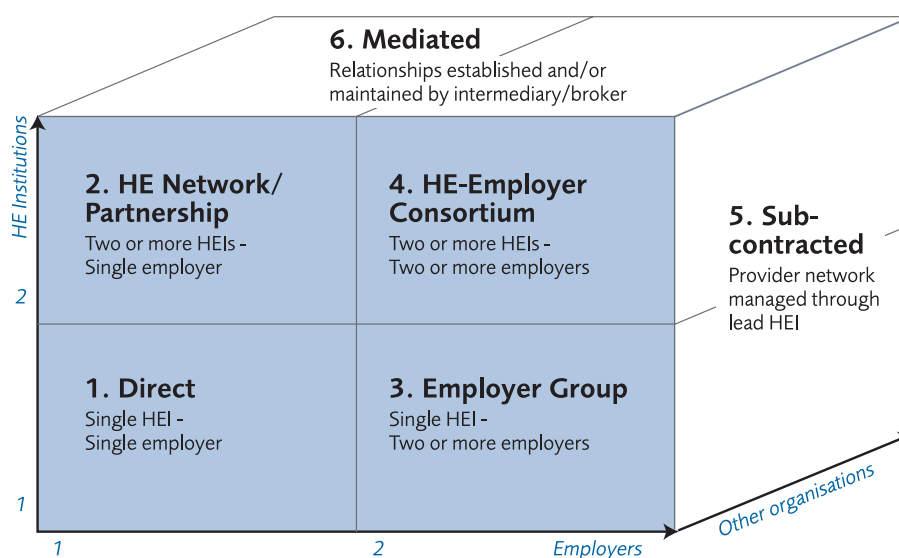
Figure 3 – Models of Engagement

From Figure 3 above it can be seen that initiatives have been categorised according to three axes: a) the number of HEIs involved, b) the number of employers involved, and c) the degree to which other organisations (such as brokers, private providers, sector organisations etc.) are involved. Further details on each of these groups and the main actors are described in Section 3.3.

3.2 Models of engagement

3.2.1 Direct

This model of engagement was most common and found in the majority of our cases (cases 1, 6, 10, A, D, E, K, N, O). In this type of engagement the relationship is between a **single HEI and a single employer** and could be driven by different actors within the HEIs as well as the employers. From the HE side (see arrow 'a' in Figure 4), people who initiate these direct relationships could be individual academics, HE managers (e.g. business liaison officers, etc.) or members of the senior management team who are driven by either personal or professional interests or in response to specific requests or tenders. From the employer side (see arrow 'b' in Figure 4), in most cases the people initiating relationships with HE are either managers responsible for staff and organisational development or senior organisational managers. In some of the cases falling into this model, there can also

be involvement of a third party, such as a Regional Development Agency (RDA), Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), professional associations, whose role is often advisory although they may also act as funders.

Figure 4 – Direct Engagement Model

In case 1, for example, the engagement with an employer was established by an individual lecturer who built on an earlier relationship with an enginee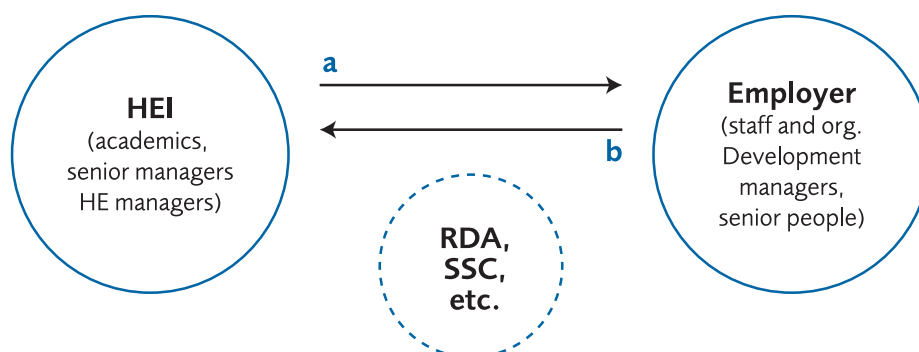ring company to deliver unaccredited, tailor-made, short courses to engineering employees to help them improve the quality of their written response to tenders (case 1). The lecturer initiated, led and managed the work and budgets herself. The motivations for this individual to initiate the training were a combination of personal interests, and a wish to bring additional staff to her area of work at an HE college.

In case 6, the relationship with an HEI was initiated by a training officer within a local public sector organisation, who approached a pre-1992 university to jointly develop a tailor-made training programme for police family liaison officers with the aim of raising their awareness of Islam and Muslim Culture. This individual was the driving force behind this initiative. The relationship also involved two academics in the university who worked closely with the employer in developing and running the programme.

In case A, a new university centre was set up in partnership between the HEI and employer to develop and deliver new undergraduate and postgraduate programmes as well as short unaccredited courses for an employer in the field of systems engineering. At the university, the relationship involved the centre's Director of Education Partnerships and the Business Partnerships Manager. Within the employer organisation, key people at a strategic level were the Technical Director (who initially approached the university), with the support of the company Chairman, while at an operational level, the relationship was managed by the company's staff development manager. The local RDA was also involved and supportive.

Other cases falling into this model of engagement included cases 10, D, E, K, N and O.

3.2.2   HE Network or Partnership

This model of engagement involved a **single employer and two or more HEIs** engaging on a single or interconnected initiative (e.g. case 4, 9, B and I). In case B, for example, the company collaborated with different HEIs around a wide range of activities. By targeting different institutions for different activities (from teaching to research) the company created a network of HEIs it closely collaborated with (see Figure 5). It co-ordinated its links with HE through its public affairs function in the UK, with a range of different people in the company leading on different initiatives with individual universities. Despite a large number of people in the company being involved in engaging/liaising with HE, there was considerable clarity on who led on each activity and, together, they formed a kind of internal network. Wherever possible, the company liked to work with individual academics in its areas of interest and some large scale activities involved senior university and company leaders. The main difference between this initiative and the two described below was that the HE institutions did not collaborate with one another on specific projects, but were rather a range of providers who the employer could approach as appropriate.
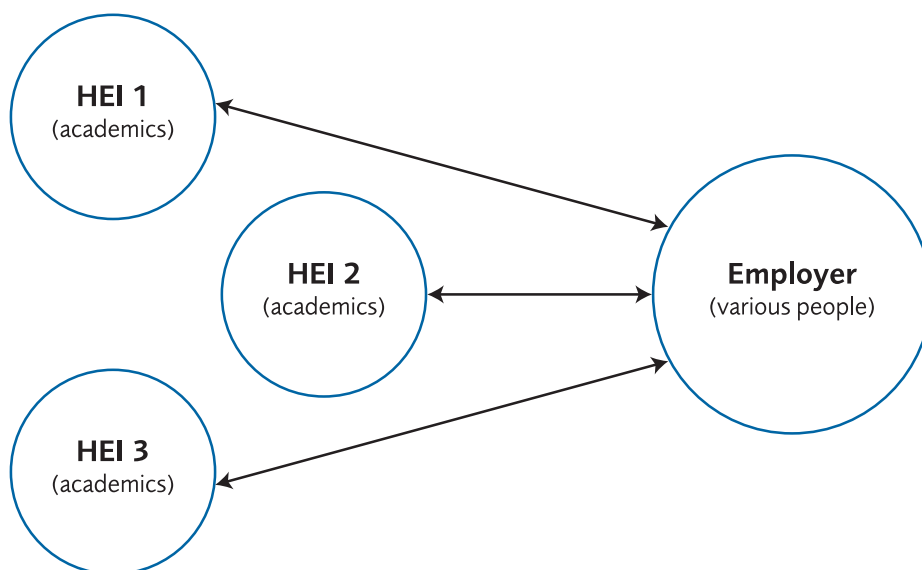
Figure 5 – HE Network Model

In cases 4 and 9 two or more HEIs worked together in partnership to offer learning and development for a single employer (see Figure 6). In case 9, for example, two HEIs worked in collaboration with a large public sector employer to develop innovative ways of meeting the need for workforce development through funding made available by the South West Higher Skills project. The initiative was led by a steering group, with representation by senior leaders from the three partners. Operational management was conducted by the 'academic group', comprised of the staff members from each organisation most closely involved in operational aspects of the project. Mid-way through the project the employer organisation also employed a workforce development manager, one day a week, to support the project and this position proved vital to maintaining the momentum for the project and acted as a key link between the managers, workforce and trainers.
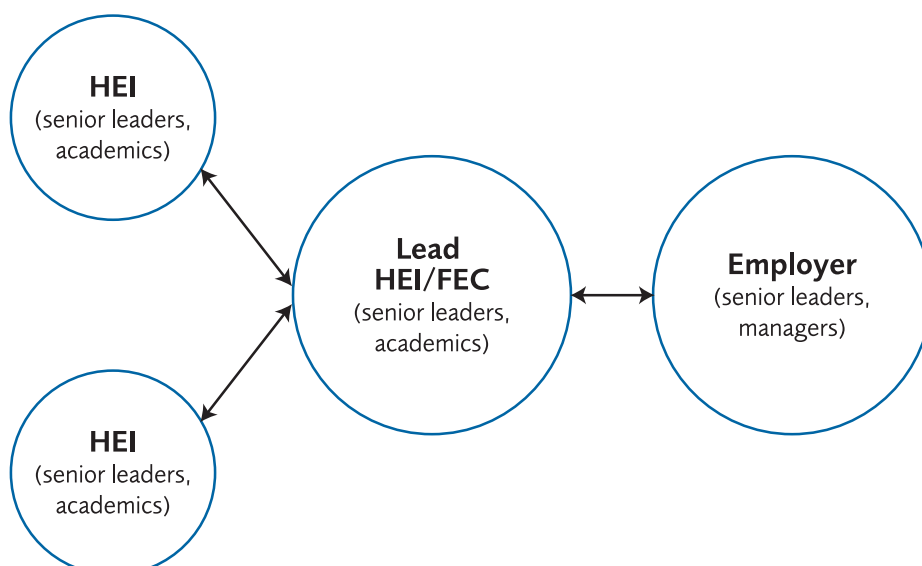
Figure 6 – HE Partnership Model

In another example, case 4, three HEIs (one pre-1992 and two post-1992) and a further education college (FEC) worked in partnership to develop three foundation degree programmes for the employer, with initial financial support from the South West Higher Skills Development Fund as well as the employer. In this particular case, a local college was the leading partner,

with additional input from the pre-1992 university as a strategic partner. The two other institutions collaborated with the employer through these two partners. At the operational level the project manager, based in the pre-1992 university, acted as the interface between the company, partner HEIs and FEC and was responsible for managing day-to-day activities of the three Fdeg programmes. At the strategic level, the project was led by a steering group with representation from a wide range of organisations, including the employer, HEIs, FEC, SSC, the RDA and others.

3.2.3   Employer Group

This model of engagement included collaboration between a **single HEI and two or more employers** on the same initiative. For example, case 7 was a programme offered by a post-1992 university to a number of local employers in order to train and stimulate people to value innovative practice through a series of workshops via the metaphor of jazz performance (see Figure 7). Having won RDA funding for this project, the university employed a Research Fellow specifically to work on this initiative. Eight SMEs were selected for the workshops and in preparation for the workshop the research fellow and the lead musician, who was also a university lecturer, visited each company to identify the focus of the workshop. As well as working with eight SMEs the project also worked with eight micro businesses combining their staff and working with them as a team. The workshops were particularly valued by employees when managers not only endorsed them, but also participated themselves. The employers involved in this initiative had no previous relationship with one another and had been approached on an individual basis by the university.
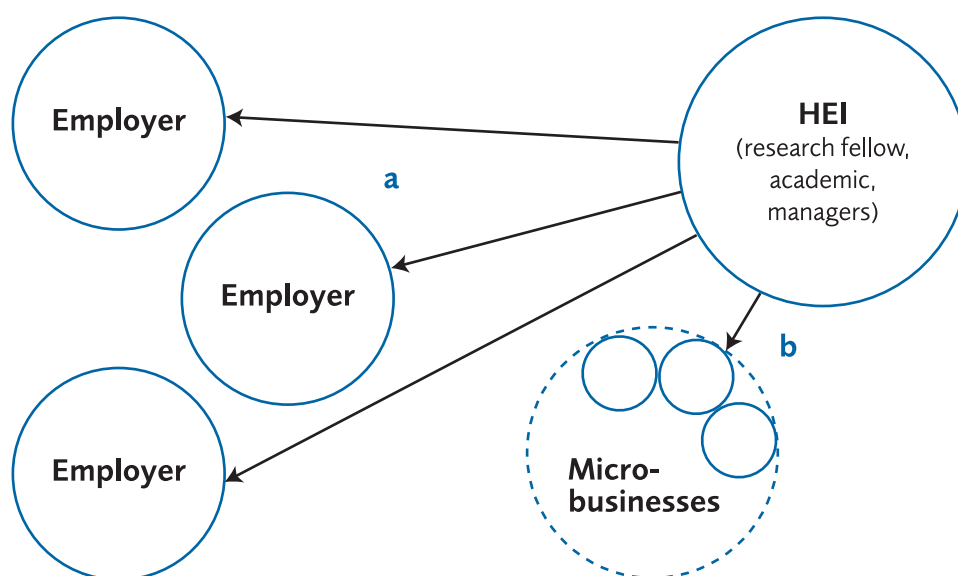
Figure 7 – Employer Group model

A similar model can be observed in case F, where a group of academics in a pre-1992 university kept in touch with former PhD students and post-doctoral fellows, in local IT firms and international companies through regular informal lunch time and evening meetings. This activity was facilitated by one academic in the department who had a designated employment opportunities/ careers role with the support of the central university development office. The motivation for these links was to a large extent social as well as driven by intellectual interest in the same kinds of technical problem – for academics to hear about applied problems and those in business to keep in touch with new research and theory in computer science. It was also in the interest of the department to develop new modules, explore new learning provision and find student work placements, and assisted in graduate recruitment for the small firms.

This and subsequent models appear to be particularly popular for HE initiatives that seek to engage SMEs and micro businesses due to the economies of scale that are not possible for single employer initiatives.

3.2.4   HE-Employer Consortium

In this model of engagement (see Figure 8) relationships are between a **consortium of two or more HE providers and a consortium of two or more employers** collaborating on the same initiative. In case 2, for example, a consortium for the cultural sector invited tenders for the design of a year-long leadership development course for emerging and mid-career leaders from the sector working in the region. A joint bid from a specialist HE college and a pre-1992 university won the tender. Strategic direction for the programme came from a steering group comprising representatives from the sponsoring organisations, including the consortium for the cultural sector, six cultural agencies, and the HE consortium. At an operational level staff were employed by the university specifically to take up the role of programme directors to lead and manage the programme on behalf of the HE consortium. The programme budget also allowed the university to employ an administrative/research assistant to provide day-to-day support to the project.
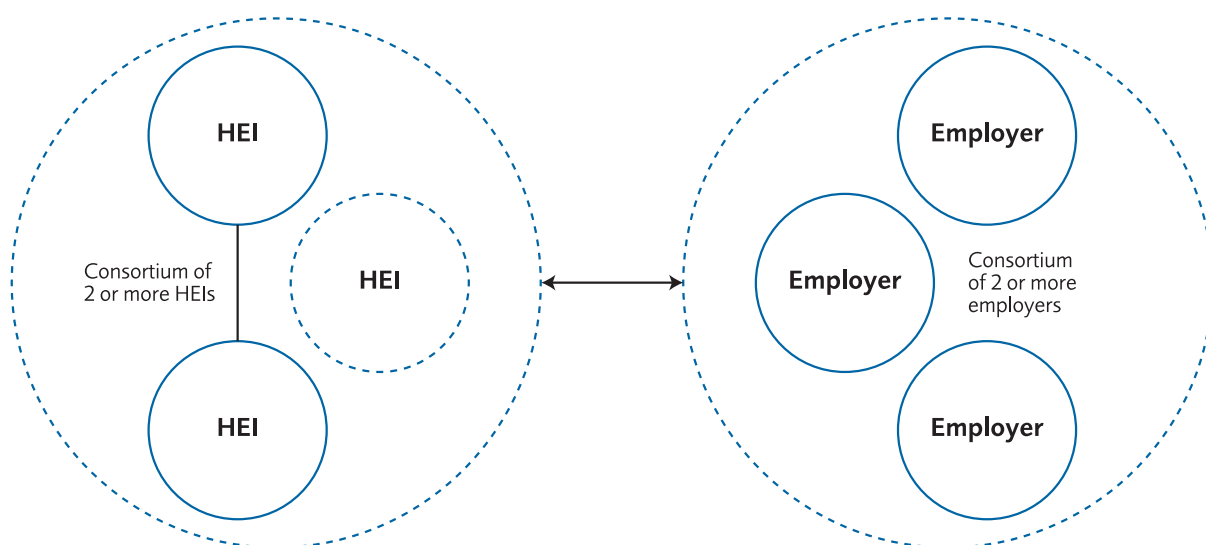
Figure 8 – HE-Employer Consortium Model

Another case falling into this model was an initiative, originally pioneered by a single HEI and two employers, which had spread to other universities and some 20 companies in the building industry (case C). The five-day programme developed through joint discussions between partners offered undergraduates an opportunity to learn to design and construct scaled down versions of buildings, bridges, etc. Much of the active support and supervision on the programme came from the industry partners. The Technical Director of one of the companies took a close interest and managed the programme along with a number of civil engineering staff at the university who felt passionately about involving industry in the undergraduate curriculum. One academic in particular had been a 'champion' and managed to persuade other colleagues of its benefits and, along with one of the employer consortium members, helped to secure ongoing funding and its spread to other universities.

3.2.5   Sub-Contracted

This model of engagement (see Figure 9) involves a **range of training providers (FE, HE and private) and a network of employers** working together on the same initiative under the guidance of a lead organisation, usually an HEI. Case 3, for example, involved a large farmer-owned dairy co-operative with 2,600 members throughout the UK which requested help from a specialist HE college to develop a training scheme for its members to give them the opportunity to receive accreditation for existing work experience, and to learn new skills and knowledge. Six modules were developed by the lead institution, in collaboration with partners, for delivery by a national network of training providers (including FECs and private trainers), with accreditation by the lead HEI. Three academic staff members from this institution were involved, along with a Higher Skills intermediary who played an active liaison role. The project also appointed a project implementation manager to work with the cooperative and training providers. On the part of the co-operative, the regional membership manager and another membership director were the two main points of contact for the HEI. The funding for this project was provided in part by the co-operative, with additional support from the South West Higher Skills Development Fund.
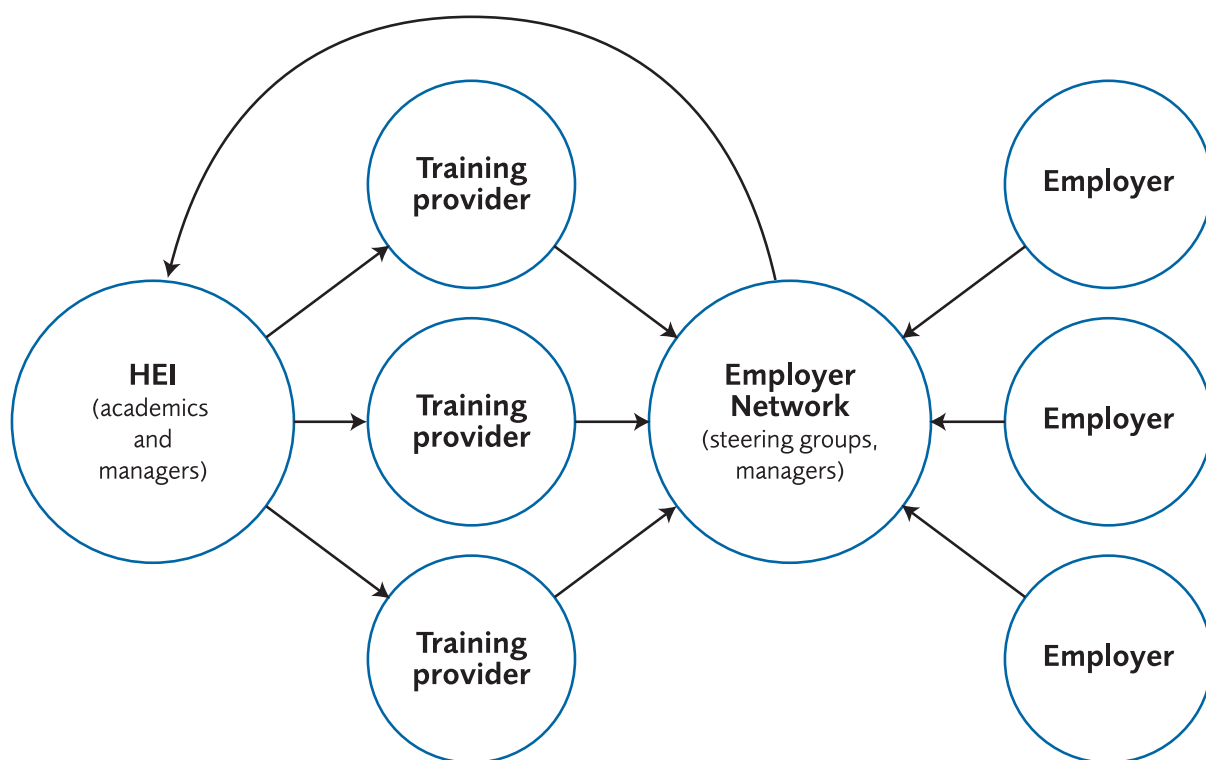
Figure 9 – Sub-Contracted Model

3.2.6 Mediated

As evident from the cases above, HEIs frequently employ project managers and programme staff to work at the interface between HE and industry/business whose main responsibility it is to facilitate an already established dialogue and relationship between HEIs and employers rather than initiating it from the outset. In addition to these managers, there are now a large number of independent skills brokers and intermediaries[23] whose main role it is to mediate the engagement process.

A recent report for the South West Regional Partnership defines brokerage as 'an independent interface between employers and the providers of skills, business development or employer (recruitment) services'[24]. There is a broad spectrum of activity which could loosely be defined as brokerage currently taking place in England, the vast bulk of which has been delivered through the mainstream services of Train to Gain (T2G), Business Link independent brokerage service, Jobcentre Plus, Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) and the Higher Level Skills Pathfinder projects (in the South West, North West and North East). SSCs are also seen as holding a vital role in developing and maintaining partnership and relationships between employers and skills providers and hence should be seen as part of the wider brokerage system.

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23   While not all organisations or staff will refer directly to themselves as brokers or intermediaries, they are marked out by the intermediary nature of their role – in bringing together employers and HE providers.

24   SLIM (2008) *A Review of the Integrated Brokerage Services in the South-West*, Exeter: Skills and Learning Intelligence Module, South West Observatory.
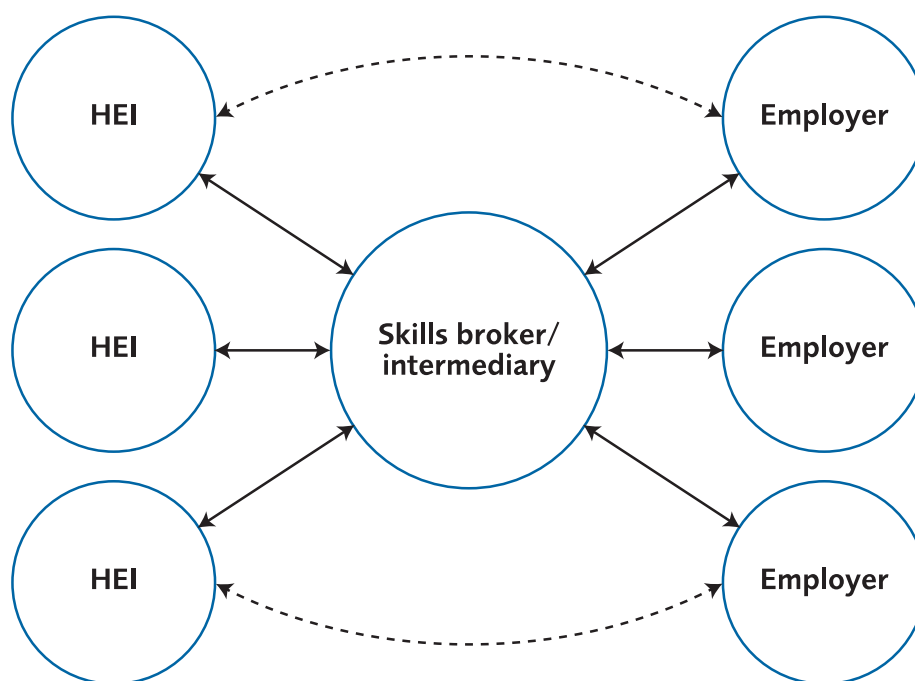
Figure 10 – Mediated Model

In the mediated relationship model (Figure 10) the **dialogue and relationship between partners is established or managed by the broker/intermediary** even though the initial idea may come from elsewhere. In case 5, for example, a Higher Skills intermediary recognised a common training need amongst several SMEs in the same industry and, through contact with an umbrella group for the industry, confirmed that this was, indeed, a relevant training gap to address. The broker then identified a college that was developing a relevant foundation degree and arranged a meeting between the college, a post-1992 university and industry representatives. Following this meeting she established a working group between partners and facilitated input from industry representatives into development of the degree.

In case 8 a staff member of an LLN met with the representative of a community-based organisation, established to support economic, social and environmental well-being of residents in a small town, where residents were believed to be disadvantaged by their distance from FE and HE providers. He explored whether there were ways in which access to HE could support the organisation's aims. Following further discussions between the LLN, the Higher Skills intermediary and the community organisation, local employers were invited to identify training needs and a programme was developed to offer businesses in the area the opportunity to attend two free training sessions, based on the Open University 'OpenLearn' material.

3.3 Who is involved?

The discussion in the previous section has shown that in order to meet the higher skills agenda as set out by the Government and to mobilise an effective response to employer needs, HEIs will increasingly find themselves drawn into complex multi-institutional partnerships and needing to collaborate with a diverse range of stakeholders. At the strategic level of these partnerships the cases point to the importance of involving senior managers both from HE and industry in supporting the partnerships and persuading staff to become involved. Furthermore, the involvement of senior managers can assist in the resourcing of partnership activities, in communicating their value, and disseminating good practice. Senior representatives are often involved in partnerships due to their designated roles and functions (e.g. PVCs or Directors responsible for Business Engagement and Partnerships from the HE side and Staff and Organisational Development managers from the employer side) and will often perform strategic roles through their involvement in steering groups for partnerships and in setting the overall tone for HE-Employer engagement (through their role as 'champions').

At the operational level within HE institutions, the most obvious people involved in the partnerships discussed above are academics who are driven by various incentives (such as their own personal, professional or research/academic interests; a wish to bring in additional income to support their departments/institutions; to support their research and other academic activities), or who are involved with employers because it is an explicit part of the institutional mission. In all this, however, clear and consistent support from their heads of department/school as well as from the very top of the institution is a key factor. At this level, the involvement of professional HE managers working at the interface between the HE and industry/business (e.g. partnership/business relations managers, career/employment managers, project managers) should not be underestimated. These managers are involved in partnerships by virtue of their roles and many of them have the business background and HE knowledge. They may initiate and help establish partnerships or come on board after the partnerships have been established to facilitate and maintain an ongoing dialogue between academics and employers. They can also be instrumental in keeping the partnerships going after a key academic leaves the institution. For employers, these people can also be a good starting contact point if they do not know who to approach at a particular institution[25].

From the employer side people involved at the operational level include staff and organisational development managers, heads of divisions (although the same people may be involved at the strategic level), managers responsible for HE engagement (e.g. managers responsible for student placements) and employees who may be given an additional role of leading on particular partnerships representing the employer. All this points to the fact that partnerships are not just institutions and organisations working together to achieve the same goal, but actually networks of people working at different levels in different positions and often pursuing quite different agendas.

In addition to representatives from the HEIs and employers themselves, a broad range of other partners may be involved, including brokers, funders and other (non HE) providers. In a number of our cases, for example, the actual delivery of HE is done by FECs, private providers and occasionally employers themselves who work alongside the HE sector in the provision of higher level skills. This demonstrates that HE provision in the workplace is not necessarily provided by academic faculty and, in many cases, it may be preferable to draw on the expertise of a wider range of contributors. In addition to brokers and other providers, a wide number of third parties have a substantial interest and stake in the skills agenda too, including the RDAs, SSCs, various employer groups and professional bodies. Our cases show that representatives from these organisations are mainly involved at a strategic level through membership of steering groups, through providing information and support, or in assisting with gaining access to funding.

In terms of setting the overall policy agenda within which partnerships take place a wide number of government departments and non-departmental agencies are involved either directly or indirectly, including the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (DBERR), Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Learning and Skills Council (LSC), UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), and the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils (formerly Sector Skills Development Agency – SSDA). This is a rapidly shifting landscape and the turbulence within this domain is demonstrative of the current priority of higher skills and employer engagement, but may also contribute towards confusion and potential duplication of effort. A summary of key actors and agencies in HE-employer partnerships is given in Figure 11[26].

25   For further details on the 'boundary spanning' role of such people please see: Whitchurch, C. (2008) *Professional Managers in UK Higher Education: Preparing for Complex Futures*. London: LFHE. URL: http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/ protected/preparingforcomplexfutures.pdf

26   For further details see: Bolden, R. and Petrov, G. (2008) *Employer Engagement with Higher Education: a Literature Review.* Exeter: HERDA-SW.

Higher Skills Policy
As implemented by DIUS, DCSF, DBERR, DTI, HEFCE, LSC, UKCES, RDAs, SSCs…

HEIs
a) Senior managers
b) Academics
c) Partnership managers
d) Career/employment managers
e) Project managers
f) Researchers

Brokers/intermediaries
a) Train to Gain
b) Business Link
c) Job centre plus
d) LLNs
e) Higher Skills Pathfinder Projects
f) SSCs

Other agencies
a) RDAs
b) SSCs
c) Employer groups
d) Professional bodies

Higher Skills Partnerships

Employers
a) Senior managers
b) Staff and organisational
   development managers
c) Technical managers
d) Heads of divisions
e) Employees

Other providers
a) FECs
b) Private training providers
c) Employers (in-house training
   and development)
d) Professional bodies

Figure 11 – Key Actors in HE-Employer Partnerships

The diversity of actors involved in the higher skills area, and the various competing agendas and priorities, means that partnerships can be difficult to manage and quite politically charged. The effective leadership of such initiatives remains an issue of concern and will be considered later in this report.

3.4   Summary

Based on the case studies, this chapter has attempted to present various models of HE-employer partnerships to show the diversity of various modes of engagement as well as the variety of organisations and people involved in partnership environments. The models, however, are not claimed to be exhaustive or most effective, but are presented here to continue with the theme of diversity. The discussion in this chapter has highlighted the following issues:

- Partnerships take many different forms. They can be direct involving only one HE and one employer, or very complex, involving a wide number of other organizations, groups and people;

- A whole range of people performing different roles at different levels may be involved in partnerships, from academics to senior managers;

- Partnerships are not just relationships between institutions and organisations but assume relationships between different people and therefore can be difficult to manage;

- HE is not only delivered by academic faculty in HEIs but may also be delivered by other providers including FECs, private training companies, consultants, and even employers themselves. Indeed, employer 'engagement' may more helpfully be seen as about HEIs *working with* employers, than HE *selling* training provision to business.

It is difficult, however, to provide evidence of which models of partnerships work best as much depends on the context and the individuals involved. The next chapter will explore these issues in more detail by discussing facilitators and barriers to effective employer engagement.

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4. Facilitators and Barriers to Effective Engagement

4.1 Introduction

As we have seen in Chapters 3 and 4 there is much variety in how and why partnerships between HE and employers develop, and who is involved in the organisations concerned:

- partnerships may emerge or expand from small beginnings, such as an employer providing work placements for HE students. Alternatively they can originate directly through a small or large new proposal for specific teaching delivery;

- ideas can emerge as a specific need identified by an employer, a more open-ended request for input, or from mutual recognition of broader shared interests;

- partnerships can be initiated by either employers or HEIs or by intermediary bodies;

- the initiative to begin collaboration can originate at operational levels in the participating organisations, or at senior managerial levels, or can be developed by mediators inside or outside the partner organisations;

The term 'intermediary' is used here, as earlier, to include anyone working in a role whose key purpose is to promote establishment of business-related engagement between HEIs and employer organisations. Roles include people working as brokers or as intermediaries, either funded by HEIs or under specially funded projects, and people employed in university business development offices, external relations offices or other similar structures.

Our cases also illustrate variety in the learning products developed by partnerships between HE and employers. The type of shared educational activity makes different demands on partnership working. In particular, adapting or enriching existing degree programmes is different from developing whole new accredited courses and also from delivering shorter bespoke training programmes. Delivering conventional lectures or classes is also different from supporting work-based learning.

So in considering the factors which may facilitate or block effective engagement, we need to bear in mind the very different contexts in which such engagement is taking place.

In the next section we summarise the evidence from the collected case studies to consider seven aspects of partnerships, identified from data analysis, within which certain factors appear to help or hinder effective collaboration. Under each of the factors explored, we illustrate its potential positive impact and – where relevant – its negative side. These aspects are as follows:

1. Strategic fit for the HEI and its partners;

2. Finding partners and establishing the relationship;

3. Designing and delivering an appropriate learning package;

4. Developing, sustaining and leading the partnership;

5. Staff resourcing and capability;

6. Culture and systems supportive of collaboration;

7. Funding and investment.

Figure 12 shows three groups of factors as defining the focus of engagement activity: the strategic fit (1), the partners involved (2) and an appropriate learning package (3). We can think of these as the WHY, WHO and WHAT of engagement. Across the middle of the model and holding the collaboration together at each stage of its lifecycle is the ability to develop, sustain and lead the partnership (4). The third group of factors, in the lower part of the diagram, support engagement activity through having the right staff (5), culture and systems (6), and finance (7) to sustain the venture.
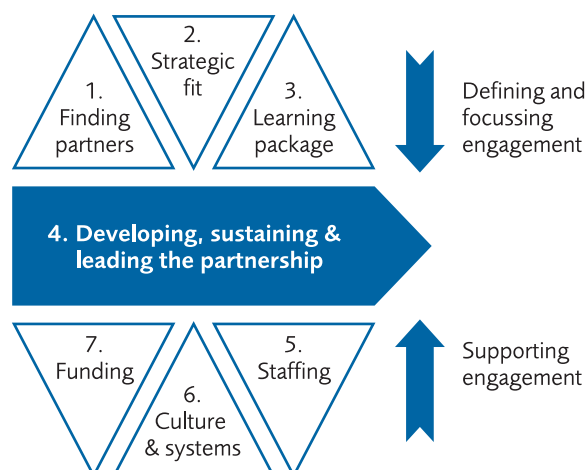
- -

Figure 12 – Factors Impacting Upon Employer Engagement

Each of the groups of factors will now be discussed in turn. Whilst they have been grouped thematically as indicated above, it should be noted that there is a high degree of interconnection between them and that factors listed under one heading may well impact directly upon those listed under another. For example, the availability of appropriate staff and funding may well be key criteria in determining strategic fit, and the nature of organisational culture and systems is likely to be instrumental in determining the nature of the learning package and which partners become involved. A summary diagram of the points raised in the following sections is presented at the end of this chapter.

4.2   Defining the focus of engagement activity

4.2.1   Strategic fit for the HEI and its partners

As identified in earlier research[27], a key factor impacting upon the likely success of an intervention/initiative is the degree to which it meets the strategic priorities of each partner. Key issues revealed within the cases in the current project are outlined below.

a)   **Alignment with institutional strengths and strategic direction** - *employer engagement activities supporting an HEI's overall direction of development not conflicting with it.*

HEIs can most easily commit to, and succeed at, activities with employers which build on their subject strengths and expertise in particular types of teaching, or which develop new offerings in line with the strategic direction of the institution. Employers need to know what kinds of teaching particular institutions or departments can deliver effectively as universities and colleges are now very diverse. HEIs should be aware of the 'brand' they project externally. Major employers often choose to work with different kinds of HEIs on different initiatives (case B). Several cases show that it is difficult for HE staff to prioritise work on initiatives which involve considerable development if these are in types of teaching which are not core to the mission of their particular institution.

b)   **A fit in terms of values, ethos and ways of working** – *staff in HE and business partners finding common ground and a shared sense of purpose.*

Both sides of any HE-business partnership need to have people who are sympathetic to, and understand, the culture of the other parties involved (see cases H, P, 1). Intermediaries can facilitate this understanding, especially at the start of the partnership, but employers and HEIs still need to find mutually acceptable ways of working with each other.

c)   **A real business need** – *engagement activity focussing on a need which is of significant concern to the employer(s) involved.*

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27   Connor, H. and Hirsh, W. (2008) *Influence through Collaboration: Employer Demand for Higher Learning and Engagement with Higher Education.* London: CIHE.

Employers most often look to HE to help improve the quantity or quality of the supply of potential recruits, especially in areas of current or expected skill shortage or where current graduates have significant skill gaps. Employers may also work with HE to gain preferential access to graduates (e.g. case G). Employers may wish to procure development for their current workforce from HE, but again usually to meet a specific need for a segment of the workforce rather than for general 'upskilling' or increased qualifications. Several cases show the difficulty of forging successful collaboration where there is no pressing skill issue for employers or where intermediaries are seeking to work with a group of employers or employees who have unclear or very diverse skill needs.

d) **HE best placed as the learning provider** – *employers coming to HE because of, not in spite of, its particular features.*

Employers are most likely to collaborate with HE when they are looking for in-depth subject expertise, especially with strong theoretical underpinning (e.g. cases 1, 3, 6, 10, J, N). HE also offers well-established quality and assessment processes, the ability to accredit qualifications, and clear skill progression through different levels of courses. Some HEIs have kudos which can attract employers and learners. Most HEIs, however, are not geared up to respond very quickly to a need for bespoke training and are not particularly cheap providers of such training unless they have geared themselves up for this specific market or are prepared to subsidise costs in order to develop expertise, profile or relationships.

e) **Benefits which the intended learners will easily recognise** – *or you may have a great course with no students on it.*

HEIs, employers and intermediaries sometimes design initiatives which fail to consider the skill needs which individuals recognise in themselves or why they may participate in HE. Students will not sign up for newly designed courses if they cannot understand what that course will give them. Employees will be very reluctant to attend a programme commissioned by their employer if it does not seem relevant to their work or career needs. Individuals are often interested in maintaining or enhancing their employability through HE but, in some of the case study examples, employees were sent to learning events designed by HEIs and really could not see why they were there. Learners are the real market for education, and a little more market research with potential learners would be beneficial.

4.2.2   Finding partners and establishing the partnership

As indicated in section 3.2 there are many different models of engagement and experiences of how these develop. The points below highlight key success factors from our own cases.

a) **Clarity of contact points in HEI** – *a central contact point for initial contact, and also, an individual academic contact in the relevant department.*

Employers wishing to explore new HEIs with which to work are often thwarted by not knowing who, in that institution, to contact. A clearly identified central contact point for an HEI is crucial, for example, an external relations or development office, as is smooth and fast transition to the more detailed information an employer will need. Employers need good communication with the relevant academic to explore possible options at an early stage in their enquiries. This relies on a central office with good knowledge of and links with individual departments, and individual academics who recognise communication with employers as part of their role, whether the query comes via the central office, or directly to them (e.g. case E).

b) **Driving interest for the engagement** – *at least one person with a driving interest to achieve the engagement between the sectors.*

At the initial stage the passion to maintain the connection and develop the proposal may come from either sector, or from someone not directly engaged with the content of the proposal, but from an intermediary whose role it is to develop the project. Case study interviewees referred to the high risk attached to partnership work at this early stage, due to the unknown nature of the work and uncertain likelihood of success. Without a strong drive to keep exploring, it is easy to let the engagement drop.

c) **Joint exploration of what is needed** – *commitment from each partner to spend time and effort exploring the employer's needs, and ways of meeting them.*

A responsive and creative approach is required from the HEIs involved, to hear and understand the employer's needs, and to consider how needs can best be met (case 2, 12, J). The employer helps by being open about its needs and providing clear information. While flexibility is important for the HEI, this is balanced by the need to remain within the bounds of strategic fit, as noted above.

d) **Building trust** – *sound interpersonal relationships between the individuals involved in face to face discussion and development.*

Although partnerships are described in organisational terms (the employer and the HEI), the nexus of the partnership, especially at the outset, is a relationship between two or more individuals. Those representing their organisation in the negotiations need to know that their own organisational needs and constraints are recognised and taken into account. For some, but not all, this includes a long-term focus. Some partnerships gradually increase the scope of their work, or build on an existing connection to move forward (e.g. cases 1 and 10). Observations are often made in case studies about the importance of trust, respect, commitment and good communication and success at this early stage depends as much on personalities as on products. Sometimes academics involved in developing the products develop good relationships and work effectively with relevant members of the employer organisation. In other cases, support is needed from an intermediary/broker whose role it is to support and build the relationship.

e) **Partnerships must be manageable** – *the complexity of the relationship should not exceed the trust that can be built.*

Potential for tension between individual organisational needs and goals increases with the size of the partnership. Large partnerships with several organisations new to each other often struggle to reach implementation stage. Where sound relationships are already established between organisations or individuals, larger partnerships have a head start. Some effective initiatives have established a learning product with just one employer and one HEI, and then spread this to a wider set of partners (e.g. case C). Collaborations involving more than one HEI are easier to manage if partnerships between universities and colleges are built up over time so that trust and understanding can grow (case Q). They are particularly difficult to manage if ambitious joint ventures are attempted before the institutions have got to know and developed a mutual respect for each other.

4.2.3 Designing and delivering an appropriate learning package

In terms of designing and developing appropriate learning opportunities the following points seem important.

a) **Creative adaptation of existing HE offerings** – *the needs of employers can often be met by building on or adapting existing courses.*

The advantages here are that employers can see an established, high quality product and any development can be achieved at reasonable time and cost (e.g. case E). Many successful collaborations enrich the practical components of existing degree courses through projects and/or work experience (e.g. cases C, O). The modular nature of much HE enables employers to use selected modules or help to develop new modules without having to design a programme from scratch or use a whole existing programme. In seeking to adapt existing offerings, HE needs to take care that the proposed solution really can meet the presenting need.

b) **Employers can offer complementary learning experiences** – *HE does not have to do it all.*

In some of the most successful collaborations, employers make practical inputs through supporting work experiences, bringing in managers or professionals from industry to teach some parts of a course or offering facilities or technology. Some cases show innovative combinations of work and study (e.g. case E). It is a blocker to think of HE as the only learning provider in the collaboration and employers only as consumers or purchasers of HE or its outputs.

c) Effective development of new or bespoke courses – *developing a new course is a demanding process and needs to be properly planned.*

Sometimes employers really do want a new kind of open programme or a course bespoke to their own needs (e.g. cases 2, 6, 12). HE needs to ensure that planned development activities are realistic in terms of time and cost and that there is a clear process for managing such development. Some institutions have specialised in bespoke training provision (e.g. case J), but they are a minority of HEIs. External funding can help with costs of developing new provision, but does not necessarily help HE deliver on timeframes employers consider acceptable.

d) Accreditation where appropriate – *accreditation can both help and hinder HE engaging with employers.*

Accrediting and awarding qualifications is an extra service the HE system can provide but it is also time consuming, especially in setting up new courses and in assessing work-related learning. There is policy pressure for HE to offer employers accredited learning, but in some cases accreditation only becomes of interest to the employer or the learners once suitable learning provision has being experienced for a while (e.g. case N). Extending short courses into accredited degree programmes can risk moving them away from the real business need they were designed to meet or make them too expensive.

e) A learning design suitable for the target group of learners – *ignoring the study preferences and abilities of learners is a dangerous mistake.*

Even if the proposed learning package may meet a real skill need for individuals, the way the learning package is put together and delivered still has to attract the target group of learners. Students were often very excited by enriching conventional degree courses with opportunities for work experience, industrial projects, or the chance to work with practising professionals (e.g. cases 3, P, C). Such activities were both interesting and career enhancing. Delivery of learning purely through ICT may be attractive for people used to computers in the workplace and with high level study skills, but can be a difficult route into HE for those unused to self-managed learning. The physical location of learning can also be a key factor for individuals, especially those working in smaller enterprises or trying to combine work with study over sustained periods of time (cases E, K, 7, 8).

4.3 Developing, sustaining and leading the partnership

Once an HE-employer partnership has been established it is important to maintain the momentum otherwise they may quickly become redundant as new priorities and opportunities come into play. Factors from the Higher Skills and CIHE case studies that supported enduring partnerships are outlined below.

a) An academic with passion for the work – *within the HEI at least one person at academic level with a passion to develop and maintain the work with the employer.*

Once beyond the initial stage of developing an agreement, drive from an intermediary can no longer carry the work forward. Unless academics involved are passionate about developing work for the partnership it is unlikely to make progress amidst competing interests.

b) Collaborative approach – *partners need to combine their understanding and knowledge as they develop and manage the work of the partnership.*

Case studies illustrate wide differences in the depth, detail and level of involvement with which employer organisations choose to involve themselves in the design and management of the work of the partnership. Styles and approaches to planning and management are often different between the two or more partners but partnerships where the HEI is willing to adapt its approach to accommodate the employer illustrate the benefits of doing so (case J) Whatever the structure selected, the relationship relies on a sense of equality between the partners. Successful partnerships commonly describe themselves as working as a team. Blocks arise when partners sense lack of equality, and when partners fail to demonstrate adequate commitment.

c)   Role clarity – *mutually agreed and understood roles in each partner organisation.*

Small partnerships with well-established relationships can collaborate easily on an as-needed informal basis (cases 1, 10) but the larger the project the greater the need for role clarity. Each organisation needs at least: a point of contact, clarity about the extent and nature of their role in the partnership, and the processes by which the partnership will operate.

d)   Ensure buy-in – *identify where, in each partner organisation, support is needed.*

Part of the partnership's early work is to recognise parts of the system where resistance could block progress, and, as soon as possible, work to encourage support (e.g. case 9). It is important that the right people are appointed to represent their organisation in the partnership. Those whose roles involve bringing others from their own organisation into the partnership must have adequate influence. Those charged to represent the needs of their organisation to the partnership must be trusted as reliable.

e)   Build in continuity – *create structures and processes to maximise stability.*

Because of the inter-personal nature of the relationships, particularly at the earlier stages of the partnership, stability is threatened if a key organisational representative leaves. Good handover is crucial. Partnerships that establish multiple relationships, building connections at both senior management and operational levels, limit the risk. Structurally, stability and continuity is maximised by developing mutually agreed plans and an approach to co-management (e.g. case A).

f)   Support at senior levels – *ongoing support from senior people in HE adds strength to partnerships.*

Senior people in HE, and in their industrial partners, play an important role as leaders in establishing collaboration and are often visible at the outset, putting together bids or negotiating agreements. They are also the gateway to resources and innovative packages. Senior people are also important in showing junior colleagues that their work is valued and in renegotiating relationships where necessary. Often they do not remain involved in this way. When they do it helps (e.g. case K).

g)   Need for ongoing leadership – *steering groups cannot lead day-to-day activity.*

Leading consortia is different from leading a relationship between one employer and one HEI. Some case studies illustrate confusion over where leadership for the initiative lies. Steering groups are often named as the central decision-making body, but action and direction is required between meetings, and leadership has to be delegated to specific people to maintain momentum. Project managers do not always have enough authority to ensure academics and business partners deliver what they have committed and need evident backing from senior levels in their partner organisation.

h)   Recognise complex leadership needs – *leadership of different kinds is needed for different aspects of the work.*

Leadership is needed in the area of project management, managing relationships, planning and implementing programmes and maintaining progress. At the academic level leadership is needed for curriculum design with all its components. In the business sector different areas for leadership can be identified. Those involved need a shared understanding of where responsibility for decision-making lies, who is responsible for ensuring decisions are carried out, and how the different aspects will be coordinated. Leadership of these different areas, but particularly at the academic level, requires personal passion and skill to encourage and maintain input over time. Different leadership skills may be needed as the partnership develops and overall leadership may well be distributed over a range of actors[28].

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28   For further details see: Bolden, R., Petrov, G. and Gosling,
      J. (2008) *Developing Collective Leadership in Higher
      Education:* Final Report. London: Leadership Foundation for
      Higher Education. URL: http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/protected/
      bolden.pdf

4.4   Supporting development activity

4.4.1   Staff resourcing and capability

Key issues relating to staffing and resourcing are as follows:

a)   Subject knowledge – *engage in areas where staff are really expert*.

The subject expertise of academics is in many ways the 'USP' (Unique Selling Point) of HE as far as employers are concerned, especially in fields where academics work at the forefront of knowledge which is also relevant outside academia. However this expertise resides in individuals and often takes them many years to develop. Successful collaborations often rely on particular individuals in an HEI which an employer comes to respect and trust (e.g. case 1). HEIs can lose the confidence of employers if they seem to lack credibility in the area of study.

b)   Teaching delivery expertise – *subject knowledge needs to be combined with skill in the particular type of learning delivery*.

HE is diverse by level of course, type of student, mix of theory and practice and delivery on or off the job. HEIs need expertise in the method of delivery and working with the types of students and employers involved in any particular collaboration. For example, some HEIs are well placed to offer postgraduate CPD (e.g. case N) while other universities or colleges are better placed to deliver work-based learning or Foundation degrees (case I). Some specialise in using new technologies to deliver learning (case 10). A few HEIs, including some business schools, have geared up to deliver bespoke short courses or personal coaching services (case J). These differences in target audience and type of teaching delivery have big implications for the skills and experience of HEI staff, including those in administrative and support functions.

c)   Customer focus and service orientation – *employers expect responsiveness from organisations they partner, and HE partners are not exempt*.

If employers invest directly in HE, or give their time to help improve it, they expect responsiveness from the universities or colleges they work with. Staff require the skills to understand employers' needs, to be good communicators (especially at times of tension or difficulty), to deliver agreed products to time and budget, to act on feedback and so forth. Intermediaries can help develop an effective interface, as can project managers, but academics also need to be responsive to the industrial partner. Effective collaborations can benefit from the natural sympathy and interests of academics with a strong industrial background and/or people in industry with academic experience (e.g. cases F, B).

d)   Resourcing employer engagement in HE – *consider carefully how any additional training delivery or course development will be resourced*.

Academics often start working with an employer in addition to their existing workload. But if supporting such collaboration or delivering additional teaching becomes a significant activity, it does need to be factored into an individual's agreed workload (e.g. case 1). One advantage of longer-term collaboration is that capability can be grown over time as funding permits (cases A, H). Some of the large, externally funded development projects recruit staff to undertake the development work. This is only effective if such staff can be recruited quickly and have the credibility and expertise to work successfully with the employer and their academic colleagues (e.g. case 4). Some HEIs act as effective brokers, bringing in experts from other institutions to extend their own expertise, sometimes globally (case N). Employers also need to bring people resources to their HE collaborations, especially the expertise of professionals working in a field and the ability to 'sign-off' on decisions (cases K, C, D, Q). HEIs may need to remind employers to plan such activities into people's diaries, especially if a long time elapses between committing to provide such resources and when they are actually required.

4.4.2   Culture and systems supportive of collaboration

In addition to skilled and motivated staff there needs to be an alignment of cultural and structural processes within the HEI and, to some extent, the employer so that they do not become barriers to effective engagement.

a)   Flexible approach to purpose of higher education – *academic staff willing to consider different understandings of their role.*

As noted above, requests from employers vary widely in the depth of knowledge they require, and whether they value broad or only specifically-focused learning. Some academic members of HEIs draw satisfaction from adapting their knowledge to a different context, and/or value engagement with industry when it matches their own core interests. Others resist when it involves apparent conflict with their understanding of the purpose of higher education, and with expectations of their role. The nature of the work with employers in which academics might reasonably be expected to engage will vary between HEIs, depending on the 'brand' of the HEI involved.

b)   Bridging cultures – *'cross-cultural' support from an intermediary is sometimes needed to establish the relationship between HEI and employer organisation.*

In cases where employees of the industry partner share similar backgrounds and values to those of the HEI, cultural disparity is more readily recognised and negotiated. Problems with cultural differences are more likely to arise when parties involved are unaware of their different assumptions. In these cases support from an intermediary (for example, a broker, or someone in a business support unit) is especially valuable to avoid misunderstandings and ease communication until understanding, or 'cultural agility', between the parties has developed. People best able to play this bridging role are often those with previous personal experience in both sectors (e.g. case 11).

c)   Time and incentives for engagement built into academic roles – *recognition and rewards for academics who engage with employer organisations.*

Some academics gain intrinsic satisfaction from interaction with industry and need little external motivation to maintain their involvement (case 1). Nevertheless, recognition from within their organisation is important, as is a system that acknowledges and compensates for time spent, especially within institutions with a strong focus on more traditional teaching and research. HEIs vary in the extent to which they acknowledge and reward the time academics spend engaging in partnerships with industry. Where such systems are absent, academics may (a) decline to be involved in such activities, (b) pursue such engagement through individual consultancy rather than through the university, or (c) choose not to become involved in other activities (such as sitting on committees and/or taking on administrative responsibilities) that are equally important within their institution.

d)   Financial and administrative flexibility – *systems in HEIs able to adapt to new needs.*

As noted earlier, academics often add engagement with industry to their existing workload with no significant reduction to their other commitments. Financial systems that absorb resulting income into general funds limit the opportunity for external acknowledgement of this work. Absorption into general funds also limits potential for staff to gain rewards and motivation by accessing additional funds for their own role and/or for their department. At another level, rigid financial and administrative systems can block otherwise creative approaches to collaborative work due to inflexibility about how to account for or deal with unfamiliar requests.

4.4.3   Funding and investment

Finally, there needs to be an appropriate and sustainable approach to funding.

a)   Recognising the real cost of employer engagement – *working with employers is an appreciable cost to HEIs.*

There are costs up front in writing bids, which senior people often do in their own time (e.g. case 4), investigating employers'

needs (case J), developing new learning materials and qualifications and in managing the relationship over time (case E). Developing new accredited programmes seems especially expensive, as is the creation of new computer systems to deliver learning. HEIs may have a poor understanding themselves of such costs. Employers do not necessarily appreciate this issue, or may assume that HEIs are already funded for such work, or that fees fully cover such additional overheads. HEIs often avoid discussing such issues clearly at the start of a relationship, but it is dangerous to pursue a significant collaboration for any length of time without being clear how it will be funded[29].

b) Public funding for development where in line with strategy – *external funding can help but also distort HE-employer engagement*.

External funding has been made available to promote employer engagement in certain aspects of HE, for example to develop Foundation degrees. Some of the sums involved are very appreciable. This external funding can act as both an enabler and a barrier to effective collaboration. The advantage is obviously that major new courses or programmes can be developed, where neither HEIs nor employers would put up such large sums of money themselves. However, it is easy for HEIs, intermediaries, and sometimes employers, to divert their real interests and needs in order to access this additional funding. Once the money has been received academics may have little interest in delivering the learning, employers may have little real interest in the product, and the development project will then fail to deliver over time. The bureaucracy around publicly funded collaborations can also use up much of the resource in meetings and committees across quite a number of partners with very little actual delivery resulting.

c) Assessing sustainability and financial risk – *most initiatives will need a sustainable income stream*.

Most HEIs need to consider offsetting the costs of developing relationships with employers, and the costs of developing new learning products against their medium term income streams from fees. The current attention on funded course development can deflect attention from considering the sustainability of an initiative at the outset. Where employers are supporting initiatives it helps if they make a commitment for several years of funding (e.g. cases A, D, 3, 4), but employer support is always potentially fragile, especially given the current economic climate. Some HEIs operate models for bespoke training which have lower costs for course development and so need fewer students to recover this cost, whilst others have become skilful at knowing which market opportunities are most likely to pay off, and to invest their own time and effort in a more strategic way. SMEs are unlikely to pay the full cost of workforce development in HE and so sustaining initiatives for them usually requires sustained public subsidy.

4.5 Summary

In this chapter we have highlighted a range of factors that impact upon the development and delivery of employer-engagement initiatives in HE. Core to these are developing an effective relationship and infrastructure within which HEIs, employers and other partners can collaborate in a sustainable manner. The points raised in this chapter are summarised diagrammatically in Figure 13.

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29 A further initiative of the South West Higher Skills Project is to develop and trial a funding methodology framework for higher skills provision. For further details please visit: http://www.herda-sw.ac.uk/currentprojects/HigherSkills/FundingMethodology/tabid/209/Default.aspx.
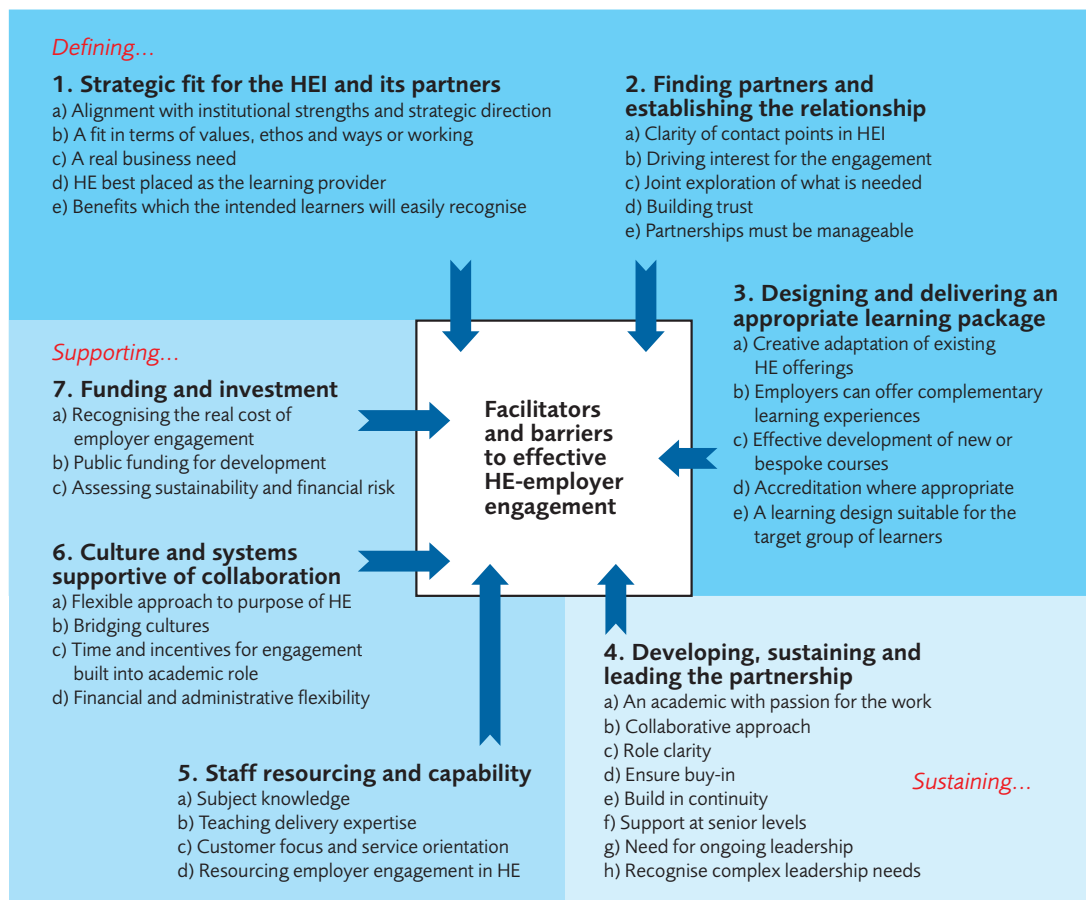
Defining…

1. Strategic fit for the HEI and its partners
a) Alignment with institutional strengths and strategic direction
b) A fit in terms of values, ethos and ways or working
c) A real business need
d) HE best placed as the learning provider
e) Benefits which the intended learners will easily recognise

2. Finding partners and establishing the relationship
a) Clarity of contact points in HEI
b) Driving interest for the engagement
c) Joint exploration of what is needed
d) Building trust
e) Partnerships must be manageable

3. Designing and delivering an appropriate learning package
a) Creative adaptation of existing HE offerings
b) Employers can offer complementary learning experiences
c) Effective development of new or bespoke courses
d) Accreditation where appropriate
e) A learning design suitable for the target group of learners

Supporting…

7. Funding and investment
a) Recognising the real cost of employer engagement
b) Public funding for development
c) Assessing sustainability and financial risk

Facilitators and barriers to effective HE-employer engagement

6. Culture and systems supportive of collaboration
a) Flexible approach to purpose of HE
b) Bridging cultures
c) Time and incentives for engagement built into academic role
d) Financial and administrative flexibility

4. Developing, sustaining and leading the partnership
a) An academic with passion for the work
b) Collaborative approach
c) Role clarity
d) Ensure buy-in
e) Build in continuity
f) Support at senior levels
g) Need for ongoing leadership
h) Recognise complex leadership needs

Sustaining…

5. Staff resourcing and capability
a) Subject knowledge
b) Teaching delivery expertise
c) Customer focus and service orientation
d) Resourcing employer engagement in HE

Figure 13 – Facilitators and Barriers to Effective HE-Employer Engagement

5. Enhancing HE-Employer Engagement

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapters of this report have laid out the landscape of HE-employer engagement and a range of factors that support or inhibit the development of effective and sustainable partnerships as identified from analysis of the CIHE and Higher Skills case studies. Chapters 3 and 4 clearly indicate that HE-employer engagement is a complex and changing field, whilst Chapter 5 highlights some key lessons for those involved in engagement initiatives at a strategic or operational level.

This final chapter summarises key issues and recommendations for those actors and organisations concerned with developing and improving the amount, quality and impact of higher skills provision for employers and their employees – in effect, it attempts to address the 'SO WHAT?' question. As with the rest of this report, the main focus will be on 'workforce development' activity that enhances the skills and capabilities of people already in work as outlined in the Leitch report[30], however, this will be considered within the wider context of HE provision in the UK and the broader mission of UK HEIs. In line with the previous chapter, this one will focus on defining, sustaining and supporting collaborative HE-employer engagement initiatives.

5.2 Defining, refining and developing the offer

There are many different ways in which HE providers can engage with employers. This might be through direct on-to-one relationships, through partnerships and networks, or mediated by brokers or intermediaries. Furthermore, there is great diversity in the types of provision that can be offered, from short courses, to more elaborate study pathways and co-designed and co-delivered programmes. From the employer perspective HEIs may be approached due to their specialist expertise in a particular field, their ability to award academic credits for learning, to increase the supply of appropriately qualified graduates, to access facilities, and/or to retain and motivate staff. Whilst this diversity may be beneficial in many ways, bringing a variety of opportunities both to HEIs and employers, our case studies demonstrate that, unless communication is clear from the outset, problems may emerge over time.

The diversity of needs and agendas for staff in HE, employers and other organisations that seek to support and enhance HE-employer engagement, make this a politically sensitive arena that may be subject to conflicts of interest, power differentials, and misunderstandings. Furthermore, the availability of funding and support, whilst capable of kick-starting engagement initiatives may distort priorities and approaches in a way that renders them less desirable when it comes to delivery. In such a complex and contested area gaining a clear and shared understanding between the various parties involved is absolutely essential. Support for this can include:

- Identifying **key representatives** for each organisation and the various groups implicated within the initiatives who will be involved in the day-to-day management and design/delivery process (e.g. academic and administrative staff, potential participants and their managers, intermediaries/brokers, etc.).

- Identifying **project 'champions'** at a senior level within each organisation to represent and endorse the initiative both internally and externally at a strategic level.

- Producing **documentation and materials** that convey the nature of the intervention and can be shared with others.

Fundamentally, however, what is required is **clear, open and honest communication** between the various parties. As with earlier research, our study has clearly indicated that for initiatives to develop to their full potential there needs to be a clear alignment between partners in term of strategy (needs and drivers), practicalities (processes, structures and resources), and people (relationships and commitment)[31]. This does not mean that each party necessarily seeks the same things out of collaboration but that there is a sufficiently high degree of compatibility between the various aims and aspirations.

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30 Leitch, S. (2006) *Prosperity for All in the Global Economy.* London: Department for Education and Skills.

31 For elaboration on this argument see: Connor, H. and Hirsh, W. (2008) *Influence through Collaboration: Employer Demand for Higher Learning and Engagement with Higher Education.* London: CIHE.

From our work on this and related projects a common call was for HEIs to be more overt in articulating their offer to employers. With increasing institutional differentiation in terms of specialisms, research/teaching orientation, and the types of learning package on offer, HEIs need to work hard to clearly define and express their potential contribution to employers and the extent to which they are able to collaborate, or are likely to compete, with other organisations. From the case studies it is clear that certain types of institution are actively targeting certain parts of the higher skills market.

If individual HEIs can find a way of more clearly articulating their **unique selling proposition** (USP) in terms of what employers can expect and what are the benefits of engaging with them rather than an independent/non-HE provider then they not only stand to attract appropriate forms of business, but may also allay some of the potential challenges/pitfalls further down the line. HE-employer engagement is fundamentally relational and, as such, requires opportunities for the various partners to get to know one another, develop a mutual understanding and respect, and explore the practicalities of working together. Four issues arising from our research that may facilitate or inhibit this process are outlined below:

-   There is a need for **HEIs** to find ways of examining the risks as well as the possible benefits of particular engagement opportunities, and to assess the likely longer-term flow of students and income that investing effort may yield. Employer focussed and demand-led provision can be time consuming and expensive to develop initially but may well lead to long term gains if opportunities can be found to contribute positively towards future initiatives.

-   There are **intermediaries** both inside HE and in public bodies charged with increasing HE-employer engagement. There is a danger in setting performance targets for these in terms of promoting collaborative activities if they are not also charged with ensuring such ventures meet real learning needs and that the partner organisations are compatible.

-   As in many other studies, the needs and constraints of **small firms** are different from those of larger employers. Most small firms need considerable support and tailoring of the product for HE offers to be attractive, and they are also the least likely to be able to fund the real cost of HE for their employees. Unless realistic and sustainable funding and delivery mechanisms are put in place then it remains likely that small firms will remain somewhat excluded from access to higher skills.

-   Fundamentally, however, it is the needs and expectations of **learners** that will influence whether or not higher skills initiatives are successful. In collaborating more closely with employers, HEIs must not lose sight of the end user and must continue to find ways of building aspirations and motivations towards higher level study.

Some key questions for HEIs, and related organisations, to consider when exploring their employer-engagement strategy are outlined below:

1. Strategic fit for the HEI and its partners

-   What kind of activity with employers would suit the kind of institution we are?
-   What kind of activity would meet a real need for employers and learners?
-   Why might employers and learners see what we/HE can offer as the best solution?

2. Finding partners and establishing the relationship

-   How will we find suitable partners and form positive relationships with them?
-   Where might we deliver more effectively if we collaborate rather than compete with other learning providers?

3. Designing and delivering an appropriate learning package

-   How do we convert an opportunity into a type of learning which meets the need of our partners and our target learners?
-   Are our offerings accessible to the various employers (e.g. small firms) and learners (e.g. people in work) with whom we want to engage?

5.3   Sustaining the initiative

In the early stages of collaboration, and frequently for much longer, the success or not rests upon the contribution of a small number of individuals. In many of our cases these people invested considerable personal effort, over and above their normal work responsibilities and, as such, raises questions over the potential for upscaling such activity.

As indicated previously, HE-employer engagement initiatives can involve a diverse range of stakeholders, often with competing aims and priorities. In such a context, effective leadership that enables partners to collaborate with one another whilst still ensuring that actions are taken forward and acted upon in a timely manner, is essential. Sustaining drive and commitment towards a shared objective/outcome can be a major challenge. Our research indicates that the key drivers for employers to engage with HE are to increase the supply of graduates or certain skills and to improve productivity or ways of working - HEIs and their partners would do well to consider how to capture evidence of the impact of employer engagement initiatives on such outcomes.

Clearly the role and shape of leadership varies according to the nature of the initiative. Direct forms of engagement may be sustained solely on the interest of a lead academic or industrial partner, whilst complex, networked relationships and partnerships require a more a more collaborative engagement. From analysis of our case studies some of the following key leadership roles were identified (sometimes fulfilled by the same person):

- **Project champion:** a senior level representative (usually one from each partner organisation) who takes responsibility for promoting and supporting the development initiative both within their own organisation and in wider debates. This type of person is particularly important for large, high-profile initiatives and may need to take a lead role in bidding for funds, negotiating contracts and signing agreements on behalf of their institution. They can also be instrumental in disseminating information about the initiative within and beyond the region, for ensuring that appropriate systems are in place within organisations to support engagement, and for managing the political dynamics of partnership working.

- **Project manager:** a person assigned day-to-day responsibilities for managing and implementing the initiative. Such people may be based within the HEI, employer and/or a support organisation, and be associated with the project on a full or part-time basis. They act as a primary source of liaison between academic and support staff within HEIs, a client relationship manager with the employer, and a point of interface for other key stakeholders. Although such people may have substantial input into the strategic content of initiatives, they are more often recruited or appointed to manage the operational side of the initiative. Over time such people can become a significant 'cog in the wheel' and difficulties may be encountered if they change or leave their role without an appropriate handover period.

- **Lead academic:** a person who takes responsibility for the academic content and quality of educational provision. Having a named academic to lead on curriculum development, accreditation and, where possible, delivery is essential if the initiative is to make the most of HE knowledge and expertise. With the dual interests of teaching and research in many universities, academics can find ways of introducing the most current research and theory into provision and of bringing back practitioner expertise and knowledge into academic research and programmes. Where temporary funding is provided for programme development academics may be bought in to develop teaching materials but, due to the specialised and personalised nature of much academic knowledge and teaching, this may be hard to use in practice if a lack of consideration is given to who will carry out the delivery. Without a clear and sustained link into the academic interests and priorities of faculty many of the potential benefits of HE-employer engagement (such as an ability to access the full-range of HE services) may be lost.

- **Steering group:** complex multi-partner initiatives frequently convene a steering group, with representation from key stakeholders, to offer overall strategic direction and to review progress against objectives. This offers a formal process for consultation and the incorporation of a diversity of views although, where perceived as primarily regulatory, it can prove challenging for managers and leaders 'on the ground' if they find themselves needing to balance competing expectations and demands.

- **Intermediary/broker:** in a number of our cases an initiating role was taken by an intermediary/broker who was able to bring the various partners together. Whilst their contribution can be essential in catalysing and moving forward engagement due to the short-term and target-focussed nature of such roles there is a danger of a leadership vacuum when work enters into the operational phase unless the leadership role is transferred to someone else.

- **Strategic partner/sponsor:** additional leadership influence may be exerted by organisations that commission, fund or advocate HE-employer engagement projects. Such organisations may include RDAs, SSCs, employer and professional associations, and funding councils. At a personal level, influence is usually exerted by representation on the steering group and at early stages of project design and scoping. Much of the influence of these partners, however, comes through their policy agenda as well as the reporting and monitoring procedures that they put into place.

From the list above it can be seen that a simple line-management structure to the leadership of HE-employer engagement initiatives is unlikely to be successful as initiatives span several organisations, each with different structures and requirements. Effective leadership and project delivery depends upon the contribution of a range of stakeholders whose inputs and roles change over time. Within such a context, whilst organisational representation is important, the explicit identification of key individuals, who are able to draw on appropriate expertise and resources as required, is paramount. Without someone to move the initiative forward between meetings momentum may quickly be lost and the project will fall behind schedule. Likewise, without an individual or group who take responsibility for a wider 'helicopter' view of the project at various intervals over time, the initiative may well go off-track or key activities may 'fall between the cracks'. Quite where the driving energy for the initiative comes from may be relatively unimportant as long as the project lead has the skills and credibility to get things done and the capacity to draw on additional resources and support as required. Contingency arrangements should also be put in place should a key actor leave or change role so that the initiative becomes embedded within a team/group rather than resting solely on one or two individuals.

Consideration is also required as to how initiatives may be sustained over a longer-term period. A clear sense of where they sit in relation to the strategic objectives of institutions and individual academics and their departments is important, especially if it is hoped that they will become more than a one-off project. In our cases, the greatest evidence of sustainability was where initiatives fed back into more formal UG and PG programmes, graduate employability and/or applied research. When establishing and supporting employer-engagement projects it should be acknowledged that the main financial, social and intellectual benefits may not be reaped until substantially further down the line.

Some key questions for HE, and related organisations, to consider when developing, sustaining and leading employer-engagement initiatives are given below:

4. Developing, sustaining and leading the partnership

- Are the necessary people in place to see the initiative through to completion and do we have a contingency plan if they leave?

- Is a sufficient level of senior support available within organisations to overcome any political/practical barriers that may be encountered?

- Are we collecting appropriate evidence to indicate the impact of such initiatives for learners and employers such that they continue to see the value of being involved?

- Do we have a sense of how this initiative may be sustained over time and/or contribute towards the development/updating of other teaching, research and student support activities?

5.4   Supporting and facilitating effective engagement

In addition to the contribution of specific individuals in progressing the initiative, appropriate organisational structures need to be in place within HEIs and partner organisations to ensure that the initiative is regarded as a valued activity and that it can operate effectively within the confines of organisational systems.

From analysis of the case studies we identified three categories of factors (staffing, culture and systems, and funding) that impact upon the likely success of HE-employer engagement initiatives. Whilst much of the attention in relation to these issues is targeted at the capacity of HEIs to respond in a timely and flexible manner to employer requests for higher skills development, it is equally important that these issues are considered from the perspective of the employer organisation and other partners (where applicable). Employer engagement is at least a two-way process, requiring the commitment of time and resources from a range of organisations. Often the main barrier to effective long-term engagement is a misalignment of practical systems and processes. HEIs rightly need to develop more flexible and responsive processes and this may require substantial investment, culture change and staff development. It is not only HEIs, however, who need to look at their systems. Funding, policy and brokerage organisations need to ensure a clarity and alignment of procedures, whilst employers may need to reconsider the way(s) in which they seek out and fund skills development.

The key to successful partnerships is developing a relationship based on mutual respect and understanding. To use the analogy from the Native American proverb "never judge a man until you walk a mile in his moccasins", universities, employers and other organisations/bodies 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.

A number of indicators as to what might be done are given in section 4.3 and some key points for reflection are given below.

> **5. Staff resourcing and capability**
>
> - Do our staff have the ability and capacity to deliver the kinds of learning we are talking to employers about? If not, what are we doing to develop and support them?
>
> - Do we have people who can deal with the administrative/management aspects of the initiative? If so, do they have sufficient recognition, credibility and influence within our own and partner organisations to carry out their work?
>
> **6. Culture and systems supportive of collaboration**
>
> - Does our institution value and support people who work with employers?
>
> - Do performance measures (both institutionally and professionally) encourage and reward employer engagement? If not, how might they be adapted?
>
> **7. Funding and investment**
>
> - Who will fund our intended work with employers, in the longer term as well as in the short term?
>
> - Can we find ways of maximising on our investment through the development of new and/or existing products/services that will embed learning and capacity within the institution?

5.5   Towards an integrated strategy for engagement

As discussed throughout this report, the landscape of employer engagement with UK HE is complex, diverse and, to some extent, contested. There is a strong political and practical drive for HEIs to engage far more actively with employers in the provision of demand-led higher skills for the working population. It is regarded not only as an additional income stream to supplement diminishing public funding per student and a new business opportunity for universities and colleges, but also as an issue of economic and social priority – to help the UK compete more effectively on a global scale and to recover from the current economic downturn.

The complexity of the terrain, however, in terms of what universities and other HE providers offer to employers, the various ways in which they engage with one another, and the motivators and drivers for engagement, may add to the confusion about what HEIs can and should be doing. There is no 'one size fits all' approach to HE and neither is there such an approach to employer engagement. Responsiveness and flexibility are key factors, but they are dependent on an appropriate support infrastructure and a culture supportive of collaboration and partnership. Key questions for HE providers (and those organisations seeking to support them) to be asking include:

-       What is the strategic orientation of our institution?

-       How can employer engagement contribute towards our aims?

-       What capacity is required in order for us to respond effectively to the needs of employers?

-       How does this work connect to our other core missions of teaching and research?

-       How can we articulate this positioning both to external clients and stakeholders as well as internally to our own staff in a way that is both clear and convincing?

-       What would be indicators of successful employer engagement and how can we continue to review and adapt our approach over time?

Returning to the points raised in the introduction, and explored throughout this report, HE-employer engagement is broader than simply the provision of workforce development programmes for a specific audience. It is an activity that can, and perhaps should, ripple throughout the entire fabric of the institution. It is not sufficient for such activity to be considered as 'third stream' (after traditional teaching and research) if organisations wish to challenge and shift embedded cultures. Instead, it should be considered as 'mainstream' – an equally valued activity that complements and enhances other activities rather than competing for time and resources.

The solution to these issues lies beyond the capacity of any single institution however an important starting place is for HEIs (and the schools and departments within them) to reflect deeply on their key purpose and to experiment with different ways of working. If HEIs can find ways of clearly identifying and articulating their potential contribution to employers, without watering down or fundamentally shifting their areas of expertise, then both types of organisation, as well as society more widely, should benefit.

Figure 14 revisits the relatively disconnected model of HE presented in the introduction to consider how HEIs can endeavour to put in place a virtuous cycle to achieving their missions.
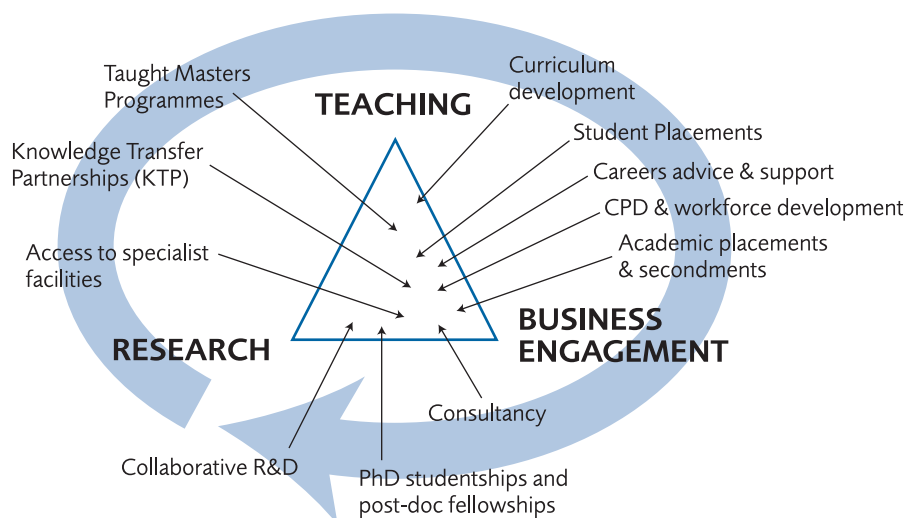
Figure 14 – A Virtuous Cycle to Achieving HE Missions

From this figure, it can be seen that business engagement (including community and employer engagement) can positively contribute towards the teaching and research missions of universities, and vice-versa. Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs), for example, can be a good way of building relationships between employers and academic and professional services staff within HE that may well lead to publishable research outputs, student learning and experience, and often the subsequent recruitment of placement students (which, in turn, further strengthens the relationship between individuals and organisations). Inviting employers to become involved in the design and delivery of taught programmes is likewise a powerful means for facilitating knowledge exchange, relationship building, and aligning research and teaching with practical industry challenges and concerns.

The specific content of such a map, and start and end points, will clearly vary between institutions however, the evidence from our case studies supports the notion that where the various offerings of HE are integrated – informing and shaping one another – then they stand a greater chance of long term success. The articulation of a holistic and consistent approach to delivering the outcomes of HE remains a significant leadership challenge both for individual HEIs as well as the sector more widely.

5.6   Next steps

We hope that the ideas presented in this report have helped you and your organisation to think through these issues in relation to your own particular context. We encourage you to reflect on the questions raised and to consider how the various insights and recommendations can be applied to your work.

The next step of this research will involve a detailed exploration of how different HEIs organise and mobilise themselves to offer higher skills provision for employers and a report of findings will be published later this year. In the meantime if you have any feedback, comments or stories/examples you would like to share please do not hesitate to contact us!