

MAKING THE THIRD STREAM, MAINSTREAM: IDENTIFYING FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE HIGHER EDUCATION-EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

In the past decade successive UK governments have placed a strong emphasis on and renewed interest in the role of higher education in skills development. In the light of recent skills policy developments in England and drawing upon the findings of an empirical qualitative study of specific workforce development initiatives and previous research, this paper identifies and analyses key factors that facilitate and/or hinder effective higher education-employer engagement activities. The lessons learned and suggested recommendations will be of interest and value to both higher education institutions and employers in establishing and, more importantly, sustaining, effective workforce development partnerships.

Key words: skills policy, employer engagement, workforce development, skills development

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Introduction

Over the years the term 'employer engagement' has developed a number of different meanings within Higher Education (HE) and remains a contested area. Successive UK government policies, particularly since the publication of the Leitch review in 2006, have strongly encouraged the increased involvement of HE in 'upskilling' the nation's workforce. Such calls have renewed interest in 'employer engagement' and associated it with 'workforce development', usually through work-based learning (WBL) and continuing professional development (CPD) for people in employment (Leitch, 2006; DIUS, 2007; UKCES, 2013). From this perspective, there has been much emphasis on demand-led education whereby existing courses are adapted to meet the requirements of specific employers both in terms of content and mode of delivery. The development of vocational Foundation Degrees and apprenticeships, training people for specific occupations or industries, and the increased involvement of higher education institutions (HEIs) in offering general workforce development and accrediting training provision offered by others, have all helped to address employers' needs.

In addition to the growth of educational provision for people in work, employer engagement has a number of other meanings within HE and is regarded as a key strand of education and research strategy. In particular, universities see employer engagement as a key element in developing student employability and in providing a positive learner experience (Helyer and Lee, 2014). With the introduction of fees and increasing international competition for high calibre entrants, the capacity of HEIs to demonstrate their contribution towards graduate employability is, and will remain, extremely important. Employability activities typically involve engaging with employers to secure student work experience and placements, work-related input to the curriculum and its delivery, career development and recruitment activities (Miller, 2007).

Universities and employers also work together on research and innovation activities – either through the provision of funding, access to research sites and/or the availability of specialist expertise and facilities (Hogarth *et al.*, 2007). Postgraduate research study (for example, Knowledge Transfer Partnerships) often includes university-employer collaborations (Kitagawa, 2014). Knowledge transfer via consultancy is another area that links employer engagement to research and is important for HEIs and businesses alike. Such relationships are beneficial for both partners and remain a significant area in which HE can both influence and learn from what is occurring in the workplace and for business to be at the heart of knowledge creation (Wilson, 2012).

For employers, engagement with HE often includes helping to define professional standards and qualifications (such as the National Occupational Standards); participation in governance (i.e. sitting on governing boards); mentoring/coaching HE staff and students; speaking to students and acting as partners in a variety of economic development related networks and partnerships (Hogarth *et al.*, 2007; Miller, 2007). Such activities develop closer strategic relationships between HEIs and a host of other organisations and highlight the extent to which employer engagement requires a partnership approach where the boundaries between different organisations become blurred and during which, people with different backgrounds and experiences, work together.

Despite the breadth of potential ‘employer engagement’ activity, government policy in England over the past ten years has firmly focused on the skills agenda (Leitch, 2006; UKCES, 2013). However, ‘the field of policy and resultant activity [.....] has not been the subject of much academic research’ (Keep, 2014: 263). This paper seeks to address the gap by focusing specifically on employer engagement in terms of HEIs working with employers to develop skills within the existing workforce. It aims to explore how effective links between HEIs and employers can be created and maintained in order to develop those in work, by identifying the facilitators and barriers to establishing and sustaining such relationships.

Following a detailed review of the development of policy around employer engagement and Higher Education, our paper focuses on three case studies, which illustrate the possible range of skills development activities that can be developed. We analyse these and add to what have previously been identified as the factors that aid and abet the development of ongoing, mutually beneficial relationships.

Background: policy developments in Higher Education-Employer Engagement

Over the past decade, the UK government's educational policy has included a marked increase in emphasis on the perceived skills gap, and the need for making HE more responsive to employer needs. Throughout the 2000s, various Labour government documents drew attention to the UK's need to match the economic progress of burgeoning low-wage economies, such as Brazil, Russia, India and China, as well as OECD countries, with a focus on high-level skills and the development of niche markets in high-technology. In December 2003, the Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration stressed the economic need for a better flow of innovation and ideas between business and universities and urged the HE sector to engage closely with employers in order to address a perceived mismatch between the needs of industry and current provision (Lambert, 2003).

In 2005, the Foster Review focused on expanding the provision of skills based learning within Further Education Colleges (FECs) and in 2006 the Further Education and Training Bill included proposals enabling FECs to apply for Foundation Degree awarding powers (DfES, 2006). This aimed to reduce the commercially significant time lag between recognition of the need for a new skill and its validation by an HEI. In the same year, Lord Leitch published his report reviewing the UK skills policy (Leitch, 2006). Whilst a keynote of his findings was the need to raise employees' aspirations and awareness of the value of skills, he also emphasised the need to increase employer investment in sub-degree and degree level provision. He recommended that the targets faced by HEIs be changed to increase the importance of workforce development and to move away from focusing on the participation rates of young learners. He set out the Labour Government's vision for a highly-skilled, knowledge-driven economy and emphasised the need to improve the scope and nature of the relationship between Further and Higher Education sectors and the relationship of both with employers in responding to the skills agenda.

This focus continued and in 2008 the then Secretary of State announced ambitious plans to deliver growth in the form of HE co-funded by employers (DIUS, 2008). It was proposed that funding would rise steadily to at least £50 million in 2010–11 enabling delivery to 20,000 entrants, thereby offsetting the financial risks for HEIs investing upfront in on-going structural changes, by sharing the resulting benefits. The Higher Education Funding Council for England's

(HEFCE) response to these demands was to establish a workforce development programme with two goals: the development of a new funding model for HE that would be co-financed with at least 50/50 costing split between university and employer, and the achievement of sustained growth in employer engagement activities across the HE sector. Between 2008 and 2011 HEFCE allocated over £100 million to support such development projects and implemented a co-funding model to support growth of at least 35,000 new entrants to HE who were co-sponsored by their employers (Kewin *et al.*, 2011). The new funding model incentivised providers to respond quickly to employer demand and to offer accessible and tailored provision. HEFCE announced that employers could expect to see more undergraduate and postgraduate courses that were relevant to employer needs, seamless progression routes between Further and Higher Education and more HEIs offering opportunities for workforce development and the formal accreditation of prior experiential learning.

When the coalition government took power in May 2010 it removed previous targets, ended further funding for the workforce development programme and initially made little specific reference to HE and workforce development (DBIS, 2010). Similarly, Wilson's Review of Business-University Collaboration in England made a very brief reference to employee upskilling and recommended that 'HEFCE should monitor the sustainability of university activity in this field and report trends and significant failures to government' (Wilson, 2012:44). He also stated that there was no evidence that withdrawal of the workforce development funding would inhibit the future of workforce development provision. Nevertheless, the coalition government continued to subsidise workforce development activities through the new Employer Ownership of Skills pilot, announced in 2012, and committed over £340 million over a four-year period (UKCES, 2013; DBIS, 2015). The key difference of this initiative, compared to Labour's workforce development programme, is that employers rather than government led and took responsibility for workforce development by designing and delivering skills solutions that met their business needs. In other words, a shift from provider-led to employer owned workforce development was envisaged, whereby employers would be given more freedom and leverage over the use of government funding co-invested with their own (DBIS, 2015).

The key successes of various government sponsored initiatives, described above, are that despite of all the challenges (e.g. differences in organisational cultures and structures) FECs, universities and employers demonstrated their ability to work together in designing and providing relevant workforce development interventions that met employer needs. However, one key question remains with regard to how sustainable and self-supporting these collaborative activities are in the mid to long term, once initial government funding ends. The evaluation of the workforce development programme found that most projects had failed to achieve a target of 50/50 costing split and did not continue beyond the government funding period (Kewin *et al.*,

2011). Similarly, projects funded in Round 1 of the Employer Ownership of Skills pilot failed to meet recruitment targets, the majority of employer co-investments in projects were in-kind (mainly staff time) rather than cash, and most project leads considered it unlikely that their activities would be sustained after government funding ceased (DBIS, 2015).

The study approach

This paper draws on the analysis of three cases of specific workforce development initiatives in England, drawn from a pool of twelve carried out over a three-year period. The three cases were chosen in order to get 'behind the scenes' appreciation of the perceptions and 'lived' experiences of different parties over time. This would not be possible if a condensed overview of all twelve cases was reported. The cases are representative of three main types of activity found in our study; adapting and revising existent academic content to meet client needs, working with clients to develop an accredited qualification to develop specific skills and developing short, bespoke and non-accredited courses. The cases also reflect three different forms of partnership. The direct model of engagement was most common and the relationship was between a single HEI and a single employer. The HE network model of engagement involved a single employer and two or more HEIs engaging on a single or interconnected initiative. The Employer network model of engagement included collaboration between a single HEI and two or more employers. The initiatives also vary from those supported at institutional, faculty and departmental level to those driven forward and managed by one individual.

Qualitative data was collected through face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders from HEIs and employers. Cases varied in length and detail and, depending on their complexity, the number of interviewees ranged from three to eight with some participants being interviewed at different stages of the initiative lifecycle. The interviewees in the companies were learning and development managers, whilst the respondents at the institutions were academics, business development and enterprise managers, and members of senior management with remit for employer engagement. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and supplemented by information from the institutions' strategic plans, teaching and learning strategies and websites. Analysis and the interpretation of findings was conducted collaboratively within the research team and cases were discussed, reviewed, and compared using several key themes; context and background of the initiative, motivations for partners involved, development and delivery of the initiative, description of the initiative, and leadership and management. Based on the analysis of these key themes, factors supporting and/or hindering the initiative, and its sustainability were identified and supplemented by the findings from previous research.

Study findings

As noted above, the initiatives illustrate the diverse range of possible higher education-employer engagement activity in the area of workforce development. Each covered different subjects, ran at different institutions and at different levels, and involved varying forms of partnership. The cases are discussed individually in this section, whilst key common themes and issues, with regard to identifying facilitators and barriers, follows.

Case 1: Cultural awareness programme for police. This case involved a county police constabulary and a university who aimed to give police officers a deeper understanding of Islamic culture and allow them to work more effectively within their diverse communities. A five-day residential programme was delivered on campus with the university also providing on-line learning support, academic course leadership and quality assurance.

The Development Manager, who was responsible for developing programmes for training officers in specialist investigation roles and coordinating and managing family liaison officers, was the driving force. He realised that the police force had little training around their dealings with the Muslim community and very little understanding of Islamic culture. This meant that they were unable to offer suitably trained family liaison officers when required. The Development Manager looked for training opportunities countrywide and, not finding any specifically designed for the police or other enforcement agencies, approached the local university which had a Centre for Islamic Studies.

Some academics were suspicious as to the motives of the police, especially as the Home Office had at the time asked university staff to look out for potential cases of radicalisation. The Development Manager was instrumental in persuading academics to support his idea and become involved. He had a series of initial meetings and discussions with the academic staff to explain what the county police force was trying to achieve and to convince them that there was no hidden agenda. In this process, a relationship of trust developed and an understanding of what each was trying to achieve was established.

The two academic course directors involved worked very closely with the Development Manager in designing the format of the programme and identifying themes and topics to be included. Once the outline was in place, the details were agreed by developing ideas discussed at initial meetings. Although the programme was initiated by a single police force, the course was advertised to all family liaison coordinators through the National Executive Board for Family Liaison. It was decided that the cost of the five-day residential programme during its trial period should be kept at a minimum to include course materials, accommodation and meals, and this was paid for by the respective forces. However, the development cost of the course was not included. The intention was to review fee levels after accreditation as the next step was to turn the programme into a post-graduate diploma.

One of the motivators for the academics to be involved in this initiative was shared values. In the words of one, he 'saw support of the idea for this course as [his] moral and ideological commitment as by providing a service for a publicly funded organisation, namely the police, [they] could facilitate a better service to the Muslim community'. Despite the fact that academics did not see any cultural or ideological barriers to being involved, they were initially reticent. This was due to a variety of factors; the novelty of the course itself, the amount of pressure they were already under in terms of teaching and research, and the fact that this additional workload would not benefit them in the latter. Nevertheless, once the programme started to develop and its aims had been explained, they became supportive and keen to contribute. The main challenge in teaching this group of learners was, as one interviewee put it: 'finding the right level and balancing what is communicable to people in employment whilst retaining an academic element.'

According to the stakeholders who were interviewed at the end of the programme, it met its stated objectives. All partners involved worked as a team and invested time and effort in getting the concept right. As a result, it met the specific needs of the police forces and took account of their requirements. The real strength of the programme was the content of many of the sessions which had been taken from its academic context and adapted for the target audience. In terms of institutional procedures, the financial structures proved to be very inflexible being geared towards traditional teaching activity. Course directors therefore had to navigate complex organisational structures and processes by utilising their social networks. It took some time before the financial systems could be adapted to meet the needs of the programme.

Case 2: Developing Foundation Degrees for a regional employer programme. This case was a partnership between an employer, one pre-1992 and two post-1992 universities and a Further Education College (FEC). Following major expansion, a regional airline decided to establish a Training Academy and invited bids from providers to work with them. The bid was won by a local FEC as the leading academic partner, with input from a pre-92 university as a strategic partner. The latter's role in the bid was to develop a Foundation Degree in Leadership and Management (L&M). Subsequently, links with two further local post-92 universities were formed whose role was to develop Foundation Degrees in Aircraft Maintenance and Airside Operations. The L&M foundation degree was to be integrated into the other two degrees supporting development of leadership skills across a range of aviation-based careers. Whilst the initial target group for the L&M Foundation Degree was middle and senior managers, the intention was to open it to all aspiring or existing leaders and managers across the aviation industry.

The four academic partners applied for and received funding to develop three Foundation Degrees from one of the regional workforce development programmes, managed by HEFCE, which was match funded by the company. Much of the company's contribution was in-kind and accounted for in staff time, for learners and for middle managers released from their operational

duties for delivery and assessment of WBL, and for time spent preparing for that role. The FEC funded the salary of the overall partnership manager, responsible for all levels of training connected with the Academy, whilst the pre-1992 university funded 0.4 of the salary of the project manager with responsibility for the three Foundation Degrees to ensure integration of L&M into the other degrees.

Key staff at FEC and the company invested time establishing the project and despite funding the college received from HEFCE for resources and development, much of the input from senior management was at the College or the individuals' own expense. Motivated staff, willing to respond to opportunities as they arose, was reported as critically important and supported development of relationships at the outset since it involved a wide range of stakeholders and differing demands. Inevitably this led to differences in expectations. An expected project output was that each organisation should gain some value from its involvement. A key challenge was to identify and manage potential inconsistencies in partners' individual agendas and support staff played the key role in this by staying aware of gaps, reassessing situations and/or 'nudging' the relevant parties.

The major challenge at the start of the project was relationship management. The Project Manager commented that were he to start the project again, he 'would have deliberately built in an opportunity for a short-term win, to support and accelerate a sense of mutual success and partnership working'. Another layer of complexity arose from the size and nature of the organisations involved, leading to communication problems. Involvement in the project was not confined to one discrete area of the organisation but cut across several, creating the likelihood of work, in the words of one interviewee, 'falling in the holes' and resulting in delays. While the company had made a commitment to the project at senior management level, accessing other staff was problematic. Translating decisions, made by senior directors in a large organisation, into tangible, practicable processes to be communicated and implemented throughout the company, was time consuming. Similarly, one interviewee at the company commented that the HEIs had also been challenging to work with, particularly given their slow delivery on agreed actions. This may have been due to the HEIs' entering unfamiliar territory, possibly combined with reluctance or resistance of individuals to move beyond their known roles. There were also inevitable intra-organisational shifts involved, leading to changes of individuals and roles.

Although technically managed by a steering group, the FEC believed that they were leading the project as they submitted and won the bid. The confusion of roles and responsibilities caused some difficulties in terms of how the project was promoted externally and brought issues of branding, reputation and the relative profile given to different partners to the fore. These issues were an ongoing challenge. In the view of the Project Manager, it would have been beneficial to the project had he taken action at the outset to make as explicit as possible the parameters of

his own role, and to clarify the anticipated inputs from each organisation, so as to avoid misunderstandings.

Differences in agendas, motivations and perceived risks were further reflected in the reactions from the FEC and pre-1992 university to the decision to postpone the L&M Foundation Degree. For the latter, with its focus on research, development of Foundation Degrees was not central to their strategy. Their main motivation was to be associated with the major regional employer and to meet their requirements. Development of a Foundation Degree brought new challenges to the university, some of which were technical and procedural and some of which required interaction, negotiation and agreement between the three main organisations involved. While the FEC placed a high priority on increasing their HE provision, for the research-intensive university, a prime concern was maintaining quality. The company appreciated the extra time needed for development, but the FEC resisted the delay. Its resistance was said, by one interviewee, to be due to the significance placed by the college on maintaining a good relationship with the company by demonstrating their efficiency.

Case 3: *English for engineers programme.* This case shows that employer engagement activities often emerge as a result of personal relationships. However, even in these seemingly simple partnerships, the outcome is dependent on a wide range of people and processes, which either facilitate their development by supporting and embedding them within institutions or constrain them due to unresponsive institutional processes.

This case involved engagement between one HEI and two engineering companies where the former developed and delivered short bespoke courses. It was established by an individual academic / Head of Department, who built on her earlier relationship with a major engineering company to deliver short training courses to engineers to improve their proposal-writing skills and aspired to develop and scale up this activity. The initial delivery, in the words of the academic, was largely down to luck as it coincided with the Chief Executive Officer recognising the lack of proposal writing skills. Later, the academic developed a link with another engineering company through referral from one of the participants on the course.

Although described as a training course, the academic characterised her approach as something deeper that aimed to 'bring about fundamental changes in the engineers' way of thinking about how they write; their whole approach to communication.' Each course was designed for the specific group of participants, based on detailed needs assessment, and operated on a project-by-project basis. The ability of the academic to respond to such requests depended on her other commitments. However, she remained available to comment on proposals after the end of the formal courses. The courses were not accredited, although the partners involved were interested in achieving this.

The academic initiated, led, managed and costed the work. The arrangement with the first company was non-financial: she provided courses to engineers in exchange for use of the company facilities, and the opportunity to support her research. Courses at the second company were paid for. For the academic, the primary motivation to initiate the partnerships was a combination of research interest and a wish to fund additional departmental staff. The academic benefitted from the research opportunities and the work facilities provided. The arrangements benefitted her institution by establishing links with two major local employers. For the employers, the course development was driven by a business imperative to write well and win contracts. The employers valued the provision as demonstrated by their ongoing requests for courses.

However, there were challenges in establishing an appropriate accounting system at her institution. Although given assurance that income would be ring-fenced for funding an additional academic staff member within her department, that promise was not honoured. The university business development manager had to get involved and only after her intervention was the issue resolved. Although the senior university manager interviewed also recognised 'the need for better coordination and championing of such activity, reward and recognition of individual staff for their contribution and finding ways of building and embedding capacity', given the difficulties of securing organisational support, the academic felt that there was poor alignment between rhetoric and reality. Over time, her focus became simply 'buying time out' for her research rather than growing the employer engagement activity and bringing in additional academic staff.

In the following section we use evidence gathered both from the cases outlined above and from previous studies to define which factors appear to help or hinder effective collaboration in workforce development with the aim of helping HEIs and employers alike to develop and sustain beneficial relationships. Under each of the factors explored, we illustrate its potential positive impact and its negative side.

Discussion of facilitators and barriers to effective higher education-employer engagement

Previous studies (for example, Rowley, 2005; Lester and Costley, 2010; Basit *et al.*, 2015) which look at working in partnership with employers, have suggested that working with employers to develop the skills of their workforce requires several changes in the normal behavior and standard working practices of HEIs. These changes are both practical and more philosophical in nature. One of the most important is the need to understand the transdisciplinary nature of the knowledge and skills required by today's workforce. Characterised by Gibbons *et al.* (1994, cited in Gustavs and Clegg, 2005) as knowledge which operates within a context of application in a transient form of organisation, the requirement for mode two knowledge is in complete contrast to mode one knowledge which is set within a well-defined disciplinary framework and is institutionalized.

Today's knowledge-based workers need to be self-motivated, self-directed practitioners who take responsibility for their on-going development (Lester and Costley, 2010). The traditional structure of subject specific faculties and departments within HEIs can make this difficult, as can teaching methods and assessment regimes which are set up to suit full time students who are often younger. Tutors need to become facilitators who do not supervise or advise so much as act as 'academic consultants' and expert resources (Roodhouse, 2007; Lester and Costley, 2010), and, in place of the traditional student, interact with customers who need to learn how to learn and develop meta-competence as well as develop new knowledge and technical skills (Basit *et al.*, 2015).

Understanding the varied needs of specific employers and the different levels of diverse employees can, therefore, be complex and flexible systems need to be in place to allow the most suitable people the time to explore, in detail, their requirements. Staff from all involved organisations also need the space and resources required to learn to work effectively together (Rowley, 2005) in a culture of trust and commitment where objectives and aims are clear and accepted by all (Foskett, 2003, cited in Benefer, 2007). The relationship entered into when working with employers is much more complicated than the normal one between an HEI and a student as it is tripartite (Basit *et al.*, 2015). The objectives identified and the subsequent learning contracts created and agreed are between the HEI, the employer and the employee and the relationships between the three parties need to be carefully managed by, potentially, specialised departments who are not faculty based. Clear communication needs to be maintained between the parties and good networks are also needed within each organisation (Rowley, 2005).

Another factor of working with employers to develop their workforce which differs to standard practice when dealing with students, is the need to recognise existing skill levels both for credit purposes where appropriate and in order to start the programme in the most appropriate place for all concerned. The diverse nature of today's workforce and the complexity of the skills required, means that simply training people to apply a pre-defined body of knowledge and skills to a range of well-understood problems is outdated (Lester and Costley, 2010). Gustavs and Clegg (2005) state that making such a relationship work requires the mutual understanding of the need to engage in a collaborative critical enquiry into work practices. This requires not only committed and able staff from within the HEI but also support and on-going coaching from managers in the workplace so that new learning and new thinking can continue to be developed once the formal programme has finished.

To summarise the findings of these earlier studies, it would seem that the main facilitators and

barriers to the development of beneficial relationships between HEIs and employers aimed at developing the workforce are: the ability to work in a multidisciplinary way across subject specific faculties and departments in a culture of trust and equal commitment in order to meet agreed objectives; the availability of skilled staff who have time to fully understand the employer's requirements and who understand the complexities of handling three sets of stakeholders who all have different needs, wants and motivation levels; flexible systems and working methods which allow all parties to work together to agreed timescales and lastly, teaching staff who can work as facilitators with a wide range of abilities and backgrounds and who are able to help the learners develop the ability to learn and critically evaluate current practice.

The key findings from our study are presented below and appear to support the findings of this earlier work, especially in the field of ensuring the right staff are involved and that there is a cultural fit between the organisations. They also expand on it, especially in regard to how to sustain meaningful employer relationships and move them forward over time with regard to establishing systems that are flexible and responsive, allowing time and valuing such collaborative activities.

The discussion and diagram below summarise both the findings of previous studies and our own. Based on secondary and primary research we identify three main groups of factors which facilitate meaningful workforce development engagement. The upper group defines the focus of the specific 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. The second group of factors, in the lower part of the diagram, support engagement activity through having the right staff (4), culture and systems (5), and finance (6) to sustain the venture. Across the middle, and holding the collaboration together at each stage of its lifecycle, is the ability to develop, sustain and lead the collaboration (7). It is clear that each of these groups forms part of the overall and all need to be present if a meaningful and sustainable relationship is to be developed.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Each of the groups of factors are discussed in detail below and although they have been grouped thematically, 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 a 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 provision and which partners become involved.

Ensuring strategic fit (1). One of the key factors impacting upon the success of an initiative is the degree to which it meets the strategic priorities of each partner. Our cases have revealed a number of key issues. The first is alignment with institutional strengths and strategic direction, where employer engagement activities support an HEI's overall direction of development and do not conflict 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. Cases 1 and 2 show that it is difficult for HE staff to prioritise work on initiatives involving considerable development and the use of teaching practices which are not core to their institutional mission.

Employers are most likely to collaborate with HE when when they are looking for in-depth subject expertise and when they know what kinds of teaching particular institutions or departments can deliver. HEIs also offer well-established quality and assessment processes, the ability to accredit qualifications, and clear progression routes. A strong reputation for quality and expertise can attract both employers and learners. Most HEIs, however, are not able to respond quickly to a need for bespoke training and are not able to provide cost effective programmes unless they have adapted their costings to suit this specific market. They need to be prepared to subsidise costs in order to develop expertise, build their profile, extend their portfolio or create new partnerships.

A responsive and creative approach is required from HEIs. They must hear and understand the employer's needs (if known), and consider how they can be met. The employer must be open about requirements and provide clear information. While flexibility is important for the HEI, this is balanced by the need to remain within the bounds of strategic fit. Both sides of any HE-employer partnership need to have people who are sympathetic to, and understand, the culture of the other parties involved. This understanding can be facilitated by project managers, especially at the start of the partnership, but employers and HEIs still need to find mutually acceptable ways of working.

Identifying suitable partners (2). The cases demonstrate that there are different models of engagement and experiences of how initiatives develop. A key issue may be having a clearly identified central contact point in an HEI and also, an individual academic contact in the relevant department. Case 1 shows that employers wishing to explore opportunities with new HEIs are often thwarted by not knowing who to contact. 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, who can pass on enquiries quickly, and individual academics who recognise communication with employers to be

part of their role. At the initial stage the passion to maintain the connection and develop the proposal may come from either sector. The interviewees referred to the high risk attached to partnership work at this early stage, due to the unknown nature of the work and uncertainty of success. Without a strong drive to keep exploring, it is easy to let the engagement levels drop.

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. Observations were often made in our case studies about the importance of building trust, respect, commitment and good communication and success at the 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 as in Cases 1 and 3. In other cases, support is needed from a third party whose role it is to support and build the relationship as in Case 2.

Potential for tension between individual organisational needs and goals increases with the size of the partnership. Case 2 shows that 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. 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. 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.

Developing appropriate learning (3). 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. 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 all of an existing course. In seeking to adapt existing offerings, HEIs must ensure that the proposed solution really does meet the declared need. Our cases also demonstrate that developing a new course is demanding and needs to be planned properly. Sometimes employers want a new kind of open programme or a course bespoke to their own needs. 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 developments. External funding can help with costs of developing new provision as in Case 2, but does not necessarily help HE deliver to timeframes employers would consider acceptable.

Even if the proposed learning meets a real skill-based need for individuals, the way the learning package is designed and delivered has to attract a target group of learners. For example, delivery of on-line learning may be attractive for people used to computers in the workplace and with high-level study skills, but it 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.

Staffing (4). As far as employers are concerned, the subject expertise of academics is the 'unique selling point' of HE, 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. Furthermore, subject knowledge has 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, while other universities or colleges are better placed to deliver WBL or Foundation Degrees. Some specialise in using new technologies to deliver learning. These differences in target audience and type of delivery have big implications for the skills and experience of HE staff, including those in professional and support functions.

Academics often start working with an employer in addition to their existing workload. But, if supporting such collaboration or delivering additional teaching becomes significant, it needs to be factored into an individual's workload. One advantage of longer-term collaboration is that capability can be grown over time as funding permits. Some large, externally funded development projects recruit staff to undertake the development work as in Case 2. 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. Employers also bring people and resources to their HE collaborations, such as the expertise of professionals working in a field. HEIs may need to remind employers to ensure such participation is diarised, especially if there is a time lapse between committing to provide resources and them being required.

Supporting culture and systems (5). In addition to skilled and motivated staff, the cases point to the need of an alignment of cultural and structural processes within the HEI and the employer so that they are not barriers to effective engagement. Requests from employers vary widely in the depth of knowledge they require, and whether they value broad or specific and focused learning. Some academics draw satisfaction from adapting their knowledge to a different context, and/or value engagement with industry when it matches their own interests as in Case 3. Others resist when it involves apparent conflict with their understanding of the purpose of HE, and with their role expectations. The nature of the work in which academics might be expected to engage in varies between HEIs, depending on the 'brand' of the HEI involved.

'Cross-cultural' support from a project manager is sometimes needed to establish the relationship between HEI and employer. 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 as in Case 1. Problems with cultural differences are more likely to arise when parties involved are unaware of their differing assumptions as in Case 2. In these instances support from a project manager is especially valuable to avoid misunderstandings and ease communication until 'cultural agility' between the parties has developed. The best people to play this bridging role are often those with previous experience of both sectors.

Some academics gain intrinsic satisfaction from interaction with industry and need little external motivation to maintain their involvement. Nevertheless, recognition from within their organisation is important, as is a system that acknowledges and compensates for time spent. HEIs vary in the extent to which they acknowledge and reward the time academics spend engaging in such partnerships. Where such systems are lacking, academics may decline involvement, pursue such engagement through individual consultancy rather than through the university, or 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. Academics often add engagement with industry to their existing workload without significant reduction to their other commitments. Financial systems that absorb resulting income into general funds limit the opportunity for external acknowledgement. Case 3 provides evidence that absorption into general income also limits the potential for staff to gain rewards and motivation by accessing additional funds for their own role and/or department. Similarly, rigid financial and administrative systems can block creative approaches to collaborative work due to inflexibility about how to account for or deal with such requests.

Funding (6). There needs to be an appropriate and sustainable approach to funding and recognising the real cost of employer engagement. Working with employers is costly for HEIs. There are upfront costs when writing bids, investigating employers' needs, developing new

learning materials and qualifications and in managing the on-going relationship. Developing accredited programmes is expensive, as is the creation of new technologies to deliver learning. HEIs may have a poor understanding of such costs. Employers do not necessarily appreciate this, or may assume that HEIs are already funded for such work, or that fees fully cover such overheads. HEIs sometimes avoid discussing such issues at the start of a relationship, but it is dangerous to pursue a significant collaboration for any length of time without being clear about funding.

As discussed above, external funding has been made available to promote employer engagement. This can act as both an enabler and a barrier to collaboration. The advantage is that major new courses or programmes can be developed, where neither HEIs nor employers invest large sums of money themselves. However, it is easy for HEIs, 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 interest in the product, and the project will then fail to deliver. The bureaucracy around publicly funded collaborations can also use up much of the resource in meetings and committees across quite a number of partners resulting in very little actual delivery.

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 focus 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, but employer support is always potentially fragile, especially in times of economic austerity. Some HEIs operate models for bespoke training which have lower costs for course development and so need fewer students to recover this, whilst others have become skillful at knowing which market opportunities are most likely to succeed, and so invest their own time and effort more strategically.

Persistence in developing, sustaining and leading the partnership (7). 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. Some initiatives are successful because they are driven by an academic with a passion to develop and maintain the work with the employer. Unless the academics involved are passionate about developing work for the partnership it is unlikely to make progress amidst competing interests. There are differences in the depth and level of involvement with which employer organisations choose to involve themselves in the design and management of the work of the partnership. Planning and management cultures and styles are often different between the two or more

partners but partnerships where the HEI is willing to adapt its approach to accommodate the employer are the most successful. 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 as in Case 1. Blocks arise when partners sense inequality in the relationship, and when partners fail to demonstrate adequate commitment as in Case 2.

Small partnerships with well-established relationships can collaborate easily on an as-needed and informal basis as in Case 3, 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. Part of the partnership's early work is to recognise parts of the system where resistance could block progress, and to work to encourage support. It is important that the right people are appointed to represent their organisation. 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 and seen as reliable.

Because of the nature of relationships, 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 could be maximised by developing agreed plans and approaches to co-management. There is also a need for ongoing support from senior staff in HEIs and business partners as they play an important role as leaders in establishing collaboration and are often visible at the outset, putting together bids or negotiating agreements. Senior staff are also important in showing junior colleagues that their work is valued and in renegotiating relationships as and when necessary.

Leading consortia is different from leading a relationship between one employer and one HEI. Case 2 illustrates confusion over leadership of the initiative. 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.

It is clear that for partnerships to be successful different leadership styles are needed for different aspects of the work. Leadership is needed in the areas of project management, managing relationships, planning and implementing programmes and maintaining progress. At the academic level, leadership is needed for all aspects of curriculum design. In the business sector, different requirements for leadership styles can also be identified. Those involved need a

shared understanding of where responsibility for decision-making lies, who is responsible for ensuring decisions are implemented, and how the various aspects are coordinated. Leadership of these different areas, but particularly at the academic level, requires personal passion and skill to encourage and maintain input over time. Varying leadership skills may be needed as the partnership develops and overall leadership may well be distributed over a range of actors (see, for example, *Bolden and Petrov, 2014; Bolden et al., 2009*).

Finally, there is much variety in how and why partnerships between HEIs and employers develop, and who is involved in the organisations concerned. Partnerships may emerge or expand from small beginnings. They can originate from various points; directly through personal contacts, or from a small or large new proposal for specific teaching delivery. Ideas can emerge as specific needs identified by an employer, a more open-ended request for input, or from mutual recognition of broader shared interests. The initiatives to begin collaboration can originate at any level in the organisations, or can be developed by individuals. Different types of workforce development activities make different demands on partnership working. For example, delivering shorter bespoke training courses versus developing longer, accredited courses or degree programmes. Thus, 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 takes place.

Conclusion

This paper explores how effective links between HEIs and employers can be created and maintained in order to develop those in work, by identifying the facilitators and barriers to establishing and sustaining such relationships. The key argument is that three main groups of factors facilitate meaningful workforce development engagement. The first group of factors identify the focus of engagement and relate to the *why*, *who* and *what* of engagement, while the second group of factors support engagement through *staffing*, *culture* and *systems*, and *finance*. Holding these together at each stage of engagement is *the ability to develop, sustain and lead the collaboration*. As there is a high degree of interconnection between these factors, the lack of one (or more) of these factors may act as a barrier and hinder effective HE-employer engagement. While the lessons and recommendations are grounded in our and others' empirical research on HE-employer engagement in skills development and will be of interest and value to both HEIs and employers in establishing and sustaining workforce development partnerships, to appreciate the complexity of this terrain further research is needed, for example, in analysing the impact of external contextual factors on engagement, exploring the role of professional bodies in workforce development activity, and evaluating the outcomes of engagement for individuals as well as their organisations.

The landscape of employer engagement within HE in England is complex, diverse and contested. There has been an on-going political and practical drive for HEIs to engage more actively with employers in the provision of demand-led workforce development. It is regarded not only as an additional income stream and a new business opportunity for universities, but also as an issue of economic and social priority – to help the UK compete more effectively on a global scale. The complexity of the terrain, however, adds to the confusion about what HEIs can and should be doing. This lack of clarity stems from the variety of funding sources, bureaucratic reporting structures, what HE providers can offer to employers, the various ways in which they engage with one another, and the differing motivators and drivers for engagement. There is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to HE nor to employer engagement. Responsiveness and flexibility are key factors, but they are dependent on an appropriate support infrastructure and a culture of collaboration and partnership.

HE-employer engagement is broader than simply the provision of workforce development programmes for a specific audience. It is an activity that can, and should, ripple throughout the entire fabric of the institution. It is not sufficient for such activity to be considered as ‘third stream’ if organisations wish to challenge and shift embedded cultures. Instead, it should be considered as ‘mainstream’ – an equally valued activity that complements and enhances others rather than competing for time and resources. When HEIs can find ways of clearly identifying and articulating their potential contribution to employers, without diluting their areas of expertise, then both types of organisation, as well society more widely, will benefit.

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Defining the focus of the engagement activity

Ensuring Strategic Fit (1)	Identifying suitable partners (2)	Developing appropriate learning (3)
HEIs need to be clear what they can deliver already and what they are able to develop	Need for clearly identified and identifiable points of contact with good knowledge of individual departments and academics	Agree on clearly defined learning objectives and adapt existing material if appropriate
The culture of the partners needs to be complimentary, they must trust each other and be equally committed to success	Willingness from both parties to explore the relationship	Develop new material where needed and if in line with current expertise levels
The requirements of the client need to be able to be met by the provider	Be able to draw on support if needed to strengthen the relationship as it develops	Consider the needs of the learners in developing pedagogic approaches
<i>PERSISTENCE IN SUSTAINING, DEVELOPING AND LEADING THE PARTNERSHIP (7)</i>		
Sufficient funds need to be available to meet up-front costs	Systems need to be supportive of collaborative working and flexible enough to cope with demands outside of the norm	Appropriate staff need to be used on such projects who are skilled in facilitation and able to offer a differentiated approach
External funds should be accessed if appropriate with the fit of the activity	Support available to manage the relationship and to develop cross disciplinary working if needed	Project management staff may be required to work across departments and disciplines. Staff must understand the responsibilities of all partners
Consider off-setting the costs of developing new materials against fee income	Time allocated for such work with employers and value given to it.	Liaison staff may maintain the relationship and be the first point of contact ensuring continuity if academic staff move on
Funding (6)	Supporting Culture & Systems (5)	Staffing (4)

Supporting engagement activity