

Employer Engagement in the Further Education Sector

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Executive Summary

This report is based on a six month investigation of how further education (FE) colleges in the north of England are responding to the employer engagement agenda as outlined in recent government and sector publications, and as represented by national restructuring of funding for vocational training and workforce development. The study comprises semi-structured interviews with college managers and staff responsible for the delivery of workforce development. This primary evidence is supplemented with additional interviews with employer organizations and intermediary sector agencies. Initial findings from this short study suggest that popular perceptions of FE colleges as *ill equipped*, or *unwilling participants* in employer engagement are misleading and provide an inadequate and potentially damaging vision of the sector. The college activities described in this study suggest an established historical relationship with local and national employers which in most cases span at least a decade. The colleges studied demonstrate an increasingly creative and innovative approach to delivering workforce development to a wide range of employers and learners with diverse education and training needs. A significant finding of this study suggests that many of these innovative structural and operational arrangements pre-date the recent Government-led employer engagement agenda.

While colleges generally welcome schemes like 'Train to Gain' and the availability of training funds, each college studied has eschewed brokerage services in favour of accessing training contracts directly via the Learning and Skills Council, or drawing on already established funding mechanisms. A secondary finding suggests that while employer engagement work is valued by colleges, it still provides considerably less income than funding for full-time students. As such, employer engagement activities can only be considered a secondary, or tertiary, activity for most further education institutions. This financial limitation is coupled with a concern among some FE managers and staff that an increased focus on employer needs, including targeted vocational training and assessment, will fundamentally change the mission of further education as a mechanism for increasing social mobility and opportunity for members of the local community – particularly low income groups and those out of work.

The overall recommendation of this report is that more research needs to be carried out to:

- determine the impact of recent reforms on the college-employer relationship;
- the impact of training on individual learners – specifically younger members of the workforce; and
- how already existing employer-facing college activities can be recognised, supported, and enhanced within the sector.

Project Description

The aim of this research has been to collect evidence of good practice and investigate the barriers and challenges to achieving successful and lasting inter-organizational relationships between further education colleges and employer organizations.

The key partners under study included:

1. further education (FE) colleges;
2. local employer organisations; and
3. related sector agencies.

Through a series of semi-structured interviews, the research project aimed to explore the everyday experiences and challenges of leading and participating in current workforce development programmes. In light of the recent reforms of the learning and skills sector, the project has also examined the perceived and actual roles and responsibilities of each of these partners, and how such complex inter-organizational relationships are managed in practice. By exploring the voice of college providers, assessors and employer organizations, the project provides the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL), the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), and the wider sector with:

- cases of successful and unsuccessful partnerships;
- lessons that can be learned from each case; and
- how initiatives like CEL can identify and support the training and learning needs of practitioners working in this diverse and changing sector.

As this project was carried out over a six month period, due to time constraints, this research is exclusively concerned with the delivery of employer engagement as part of the Government strategy to up-skill adults already in employment. This is to the exclusion of the 14-19 strategy and the full and part-time education of adults and those currently out of work. Future research in this area will incorporate these parallel strategies, but for now they are discussed throughout this report as a secondary or background feature of the fieldwork conducted.