Exploring Effective Employer Engagement and Learner Voice

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“This scheme allows me to gain extensive work experience whilst studying for a degree and not have any debt at the end of the training.”

(BAE Trainee, 2008)
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Executive Summary

The recent Leitch and Foster reports and Government White papers strongly encourage FE colleges to engage much more closely with employers. Equally, recent policy documents (such as Foster and Framework for Excellence) emphasise the importance of listening to the views of learners to ensure quality improvement. This project combines a focus on employer engagement with an interest in learner voice. Drawing on a case study of good practice, it examines an initiative between BAE Systems Military Air Solutions (M.A.S.) and Blackpool and The Fylde College (BFC) designed to enhance the project management skills of employees at BAE Systems. The ‘Project Control Foundation Scheme’ (PCFS) enables school leavers to be employed at BAE Systems whilst also studying for a degree.

The research found that trainees are very positive about both their employment experiences and the more academic knowledge they are acquiring at the College. They are confident that completing the scheme will provide them with excellent long term career prospects within BAE Systems. In relation to the degree element of the scheme, trainees were also very happy with the quality of teaching, the standard of work they were doing and the facilities at BFC. For BAE Systems management, the scheme appeared to be meeting a key criterion, providing the company with a growing pool of talented and qualified employees in a strategically important area, who would be more likely to remain loyal to BAE Systems. The report highlights three areas where more clarity and consistency would assist the trainees. These refer to the completion of college work and the granting of study days; the calculation and application of performance related pay; and overtime requirements for trainees.
Introduction

Encouraging greater employer engagement is now seen as a vital element in the UK Government’s current strategy to increase the knowledge, skills and life chances of 14-19 year olds in full-time education and to up-skill adult learners to a minimum standard by 2020. This strategy includes an emphasis on work based learning for both young people and adults (Kelly 2007). The Leitch and Foster Reports as well as various Government White papers strongly encourage FE colleges to engage much more closely and extensively with employers. Equally, employers are increasingly interested in the professional development and training of their employees, and academic institutions can play a very important role in these development practices. The potential for collaboration between employers and further (and higher) education would therefore appear to be considerable (Hughes and Smeaton 2005, Chapman 2006).

This research report outlines a specific case study of a joint initiative between a major employer and an excellent FE college. It draws on a research project which examined a collaboration between BAE Systems and Blackpool and The Fylde College (BFC) designed to enhance the project management skills of employees at BAE Systems. The ‘Project Control Foundation Scheme’ (PCFS) provides employment within BAE Systems for school leavers who have achieved excellent A level results and who wish to study to degree level whilst also being in employment. Over a five year period, the Scheme comprises work experience, training, NVQs and more academic inputs. Trainees are also given day release (on Thursdays) in order to study to degree level at BFC. This scheme, which began in the academic year 2007-08, was recently highlighted in the TES as being very innovative with potentially beneficial consequences for the trainees, the college and the company (August 2007). In its first year, the scheme recruited 23 trainees who worked at BAE Systems for four days a week and also studied for a foundation and then a BSC degree at BFC.

The PCFS was established within a year of the initial idea being discussed within BAE Systems. The concept was first floated at the end of 2006 and in January 2007 the details of the scheme were being worked on by various managers. The tender to choose the academic partner of the scheme was issued in March and prospective trainees were being interviewed during May and June. The scheme ‘went live’ in September 2007. Given the demands of setting up such a scheme (which involved extensive co-ordination between a local private sector organisation, a Further Education College and a Higher Education Institution) this timescale could be said to provide a best practice guideline for successful employer engagement.
The following research report explores the background to the initiative, the visions and motivations of leaders and senior managers in both organizations, and the early impact of this scheme, particularly on trainees. Hence, the report is concerned to examine important inter-relationships between key issues of strategic significance for CEL, between the development of employer-engagement and student voice within the learning and skills sector (LSS). From CEL's perspective, one of the unusual aspects of this project is that it involves an empirical study of practices in a major private sector organization. The project also builds on earlier CEL research highlighting the significance of employer engagement (Kelly 2007), learner voice generally (Collinson 2007) and for understanding the leadership of faith issues in FE colleges more particularly (Collinson and Collinson 2007).
Research Methods

BAE Systems and Blackpool and Fylde College were contacted in September 2007 with a view to conducting a short, six month research project that would explore the views and experiences of trainees, managers and lecturers involved in the PCFS. Initial research interviews took place with senior managers at both the College (including a meeting with the Principal) and the company who all agreed to participate in the research project. It was envisaged by all parties that the research project would provide BAE Systems, BFC and CEL with a “snapshot” of the inception of the training scheme/foundation degree that could highlight learning outcomes for all involved and establish an indicative framework for good practice. During discussions, senior managers in both institutions were also concerned that the report should not contain any confidential or commercially sensitive information. Therefore it was agreed that both institutions would have a veto on any sections of the report that they considered fell into that category.

The research adopted a primarily qualitative approach, seeking to explore the subjective intentions, practices and experiences of those involved in creating the new programme on Project Control both at BAE Systems and BFC. It also examined the views of those who were experiencing the programme as trainees. Research interviews explored issues surrounding the following three key questions:

1. What are the benefits for the employer of this collaboration with the College?
2. What are the benefits for the College of this engagement with a major employer?
3. What are the subjective views and experiences of the trainees on this new programme?

Research interviews were conducted between October and April, with more concentrated interviewing in: November 2007 and March/April 2008, with the following key participants:

- 4 key BAE managers/staff involved in the Project Control Foundation Scheme and foundation degree,
- 10 trainees (interviewed twice) who have been recruited onto the first year of this innovative scheme,
- 4 managers and teaching staff at BFC who are also involved in the day-to-day implementation of the scheme.

As the project concentrated particularly on the learner voice, the ten trainees were interviewed twice, once at the beginning of the research and then again towards the end of the project. The second interviews allowed the researcher to identify and establish the key issues that were consistently raised by the trainees after the initial settling in period within their respective teams.
Research Findings

The research findings and key themes are now presented, by exploring the perspectives of:

1. BAE Systems managers,
2. BFC lecturers and
3. The views and experiences of the trainees themselves.

Perspectives of BAE Systems Managers

According to BAE Systems promotional literature,

“Project management is the key discipline to ensure that we deliver our projects to time, budget and customers’ expectations. Our teams work across the business in both the projects and functional areas.....Project controllers have key roles within the Project Management organisation and are involved in all phases of the lifecycles of our projects, from bid preparation and submission through development, manufacturing and in-service support. They are the eyes and ears of the project ensuring that it stays on track.”

Managers explained that BAE Systems are keen to enhance and upgrade the skills of project managers whose role is strategically vital to the company as they can be coordinating multi-billion pound projects.

BAE Systems manufacture technologically sophisticated products and this is reflected in a complex internal structure designed to deliver these products on time and of the requisite quality. This necessitates large numbers of effective technical decisions, which in turn requires skills of judgement, management and the right information. In this regard project controllers are absolutely key. They are closely involved in the planning, monitoring and control of all projects, which includes among other key tasks: risk analysis, earned value analysis, project planning, detailed scheduling, control of change, detailed cost estimates and forecasting.

Yet, the company has experienced difficulty in finding the people who can and wish to undertake this role. According to managers, the technical people who are capable of providing this information sometimes find the work of project control rather mechanical, mundane and/or too managerial. Consequently, within some technical areas, the role of project management has been underplayed and even undervalued within the organization. This new scheme was designed to improve the status of the function and to provide a career path by establishing project control as a profession and a discipline in its own right.
The original idea to establish a training scheme on project control with a degree level component emerged in response to a proposal by a senior manager, the Director of Business Operations in BAE Systems’ (M.A.S.) largest and primary project. This manager had suggested that one way to address the shortage of project managers would be to create a training/apprentice scheme that would enable BAE Systems to “home grow” its own talent, as he explained in a research interview:

“We were having problems in recruiting. We were recruiting but struggling to grow our own talent. People were leaving. This scheme started in my head. I just thought there must be a market out there because of the costs of going to University. There’s a lot of talented people and we could sell them the University aspect too. This could form the nucleus of growing our own talent. I just thought that if we recruit locally, and grow our own and provide an academic qualification with it, generally people will stay longer. I am passionate about this!”

The four managers who were interviewed for this project all considered that the scheme would provide local students, who had attained very good A level results, with an alternative to the usual career path of University and then work. It would mean that these students could study whilst also building their career. They could experience employment (with a major organization), whilst studying to degree level, but, crucially, without falling into the high levels of debt now often associated with undertaking a conventional degree from a UK University.

Managers also believed that the training scheme would enable BAE Systems to “mould” future project managers and create loyal employees who would wish to pursue a career path within BAE, thereby assisting the company to retain a stable workforce of committed employees.

“If you recruit locally and grow your own talent but provide academic qualifications then you are more likely to also get loyalty.”

In terms of selecting the most appropriate partner to deliver the academic side of the scheme, BAE Systems managers explained that originally they did not consider BFC as a partner. Initially, BAE Systems invited a university and another FE College to tender for the contract but they were disappointed with the response. At this point they approached BFC. BAE Systems managers all stated that they were extremely impressed with the presentation given by the Marketing Director from BFC. Another key consideration in awarding the contract to BFC was that, due to existing links between BFC and Lancaster University, the degree would be accredited by a major University with an excellent reputation. As one manager explained,

“BAE did not know about the quality of the local FE College and that it had links with Lancaster University. This connection helped a great deal.”
Managers confirmed that the professional presentation and detailed proposal from BFC combined with the accreditation of the degree by Lancaster University were instrumental in BAE Systems decision to award the tender to the College.

**Perspectives of BFC Managers’ & Lecturers**

When approached by BAE Systems about providing the academic element of the PCFS, the Principal of BFC was very supportive of a competitive bid to establish the College as the provider of the degree course. The College brought together a strong team of staff to prepare the tender. BFC senior managers explained that the programme had been through extensive preparation and validation with all stakeholders. The Senior Commercial Manager of the College made a presentation that impressed BAE in terms of its quality, objectives, content and overall professionalism. In a research interview the Principal explained how all the staff involved in the bid were delighted to have won the tender against such a strong opposition consortium. This new collaboration with BAE Systems was very consistent with the longer term strategic goals of the college to develop closer links with major employers in the region.

During research interviews, staff involved in teaching on the degree element of the PCFS were extremely positive about the relationship with BAE. As with most FE colleges, BFC draws students from all sections of the community. Consequently the tutors were highly experienced and skilled in teaching classes in a creative way that ensured students assimilated the required level of knowledge, whilst also retaining a keen interest in the subject. The staff interviewed all stated that they found the trainees a pleasure to teach as they were extremely focussed and eager to do well in their coursework.

**Perspectives of the PCFS Trainees**

The following section presents the key findings from the two sets of research interviews with the trainees on the PCFS (conducted mainly in November and April). In particular, these sub-sections address the following themes: (1) overview of the PCFS, (2) working for BAE, (3) profile of an effective Project Controller, (4) academic placement and location, and (5) Emergent Issues.

**Overview of the PCFS**

During both sets of interviews with the trainees, they all expressed a very positive view of the PCFS and BFC. The trainees stated that the induction course was very thorough and that there was a very effective integration between the BAE Systems and BFC induction sessions. The majority of trainees specifically mentioned the team building course that took place at the sea cadet campus of the College as being the highlight of the induction programme.
When the trainees were asked why they chose to compete for a place on the PCFS, rather than pursuing a place at university, the following reasons were given:

- The combination of work experience and studying for a degree.
- The comparatively good salary.
- The opportunity to gain a degree without also accruing considerable debt.
- The excellent long-term career prospects within BAE.
- The opportunity to stay, work and study in the local area.

In relation to the degree element of the course, the trainees confirmed that, before entering the scheme, they would never have considered completing a degree course at BFC. The accreditation of the degree by Lancaster University was widely considered to add to the attractiveness of the PCFS. Indeed, all the trainees stated that they were very happy with the course at BFC. Everyone highlighted how helpful and accessible the staff at BFC were, and how the College provided a supportive and encouraging environment for the trainees on the scheme, as the follow statements demonstrate:

“I really like college, it is hard work but I love learning. I would never have thought of doing a degree at BFC.”

“The teachers are very positive and very supportive, I did not know a lot about BFC and would never have thought of doing a degree there. The affiliation to Lancaster University did help and I am really enjoying the course.”

One issue, repeatedly highlighted by both staff at the College and the BAE Systems trainees, was the apparent gap between the level of work required to complete an essay at A level standard and the more in-depth and demanding analysis (and presentational requirements) needed for academic work produced for degree level. Both the trainees and BFC staff talked about the increased help that was needed by the trainees (and given by the staff), in order for trainees to understand how to write a piece of work that made the leap from description to in-depth analysis. The following statements from different trainees illustrate this common view,

“I found it difficult to jump from “A” level to Foundation degree, it has surprised me the difference in what is required.”

“The expectations are different but the tutors have given us a lot of help.”
Staff explained that in order to assist the trainees in making this shift, they had in some cases provided a great deal of additional help by giving extensive feedback on drafts (in some instances on more than one draft) before final submission. During the second round of interviews, the trainees confirmed that tutors at the College had explained that in future, trainees should not require the level of assistance that had been provided in the early stages of the course.

**Working for BAE**

In response to questions about their perceptions of becoming a BAE Systems employee, the trainees stressed the extent to which, even at this early stage of their training, they felt part of the BAE community and fully integrated within the work teams to which they had been allocated. The trainees also confirmed that, as members of the scheme, they felt a strong loyalty to BAE and viewed a place on the scheme as being highly positive for their career, as the following two comments illustrate,

“I would be looking to spend my career here. I definitely feel a strong loyalty to BAE.”

“BAE are a very good employer. They look after you. They provide personal development and pensions. I think this scheme will certainly produce loyal employees.”

In research interviews, BAE Systems managers had highlighted the importance of attracting and retaining project managers. They saw the PCFS as one way in which BAE could engender loyalty to the company by “growing its own” future project managers. At the time of the research, the general view of trainees from both sets of interviews tends to confirm that this important objective of securing employee loyalty to BAE Systems, was being achieved by the PCFS.

Research interviews with trainees on the PCFS also examined their integration with the community of graduate trainees employed by the company. The general view of the PCFS trainees was that, after completing their training, they would be in a much stronger position within the company than a newly appointed graduate trainee. In addition to acquiring a degree, the trainees were very confident that they would also have the added benefit of in-depth knowledge of BAE systems, culture and practices.

**The Profile of an Effective Project Controller**

The second round of interviews examined trainees’ most recent experiences at BAE and BFC and explored in more detail their perceptions about the role of project controller. Accordingly, all trainees were asked what they considered to be key qualities that constitute an effective project controller based on their work experience at BAE. At this early stage of their training, the trainees identified the following as desirable qualities of a project controller:
Excellent communication skills;

The ability to use resources effectively;

A broad range of I.T. skills;

Clear knowledge of the skills mix needed to establish an effective project team;

A friendly open and approachable persona;

Commitment to continuous learning.

There was an overall view that an effective project manager would establish a friendly atmosphere within their team, thereby defusing the pressure of heavy workloads, and generating a sense of commitment from their team members.

**Academic Placement and Location**

During the second set of interviews with the trainees in the spring of 2008, the applicants for Year 2 of the PCFS were in the process of being interviewed for vacancies on the scheme. At this time, the expansion of the scheme into other areas was being discussed across the company so the researcher decided to add a question about the location of the academic element of the scheme. In anticipation of the number of trainees increasing year on year, the possibility of relocating the academic element of the 5 year degree to an on-site location might be a consideration at a future date. The researcher considered it may therefore be relevant to ask trainees for their views on a possible relocation of the academic element of the scheme to an on-site location.

All the trainees were extremely positive about the continuation of the teaching on-site at BFC. They were unanimous in their view that the facilities such as the library, computer support, the accessibility of teachers and the range of activities could not be reproduced in the company. The trainees also discussed the importance of being in an academic environment and how this culture of learning and education had assisted them in pursuing their studies.

“It is really good going into an educational environment. The culture is focussed on learning.”

“The educational side of the training scheme is definitely best placed at college.”

“We love day release. It reminds us that we are also students as well as workers.”

“It is a different environment than the workplace.”
Although it is still early days for the PCFS, the researcher considered it may be of interest to the managers involved in the scheme to be aware of the trainees’ views on the value of locating the degree element of the PCFS within an academic environment. These views were unanimous.

**Emergent Issues for Consideration and Discussion**

During discussions about all aspects of the scheme, trainees discussed certain confusions, anomalies and perceived inconsistencies in the way that certain practices had so far been implemented. These recurrent themes centred on the areas of college coursework and study days; performance related pay; and overtime. The following sub-sections now outline the inconsistencies as perceived by trainees during their interviews.

**College Coursework & Study Days**

The majority of the trainees mentioned the importance of effectively managing the balance between their work-based projects (for BAE Systems) and the 2 academic projects per month which need to be completed (for BFC).

In discussing this balance between BAE Systems and BFC work, the majority of the trainees also highlighted an inconsistency existing across different departments regarding the completion of college work in the BAE Systems’ workplace. Some trainees confirmed that they were allowed to complete college projects within work-time, whilst others explained that, due to their workloads, they just did not have time in the working day to complete any of their academic projects. Equally, some trainees stated that their managers did not want them completing college work in BAE Systems time. This (perception of) inconsistency was mentioned by the majority of trainees in both sets of interviews.

A second inconsistent approach also emerged in relation to the granting of a study day before exams. It appeared that although there was a formal company policy that study days were not allowed for trainees, this had also not been applied consistently.

Overall, the trainees generally considered that this inconsistency of approach by managers created some confusion about the formal policies relating to the scheme and the informal practices.

**Performance Related Pay**

In research interviews, most of the trainees discussed the issue of performance related pay (PRP). They understood that the grades achieved in their college coursework would be taken into account in the calculation of their PRP. However, they were much less clear about how exactly their PRP would be calculated overall.

Although the trainees are just beginning their 5 year programme of study, it was evident that the majority were starting to recognise and appreciate the implications of the PRP scheme. Despite being unclear about exactly how the PRP would be applied, they were aware that the outcome of the application of PRP would serve as
a signal and a measure of their performance both to themselves, to the other trainees and to the company. Other research in management and organization studies emphasises the symbolic importance that typically characterises PRP and HR reward systems generally. Accordingly, it is important that the trainees fully understand how their PRP is calculated.

Overtime

The issue of working overtime was mentioned by trainees in relation to discussions about the need for trainees to find a balance between BAE and college work. It appeared that some trainees were expected to work overtime as this was part of the requirements of the particular area/department of BAE in which they were working. In other cases, trainees had either not been asked to work overtime or had felt able to decline in order to focus on their college work.
Summary

To return to the three key questions that formed the basis of the research project:

1. **What are the benefits for the employer of this collaboration with the College?**

   The research demonstrates that BAE Systems’ choice of BFC as the institution to provide the academic element of the PCFS has been a sound decision. The trainees are extremely satisfied with the content of the course, they considered BFC staff to be helpful and accessible and they stated that the college provided a supportive learning environment.

2. **What are the benefits for the College of this engagement with a major employer?**

   The research demonstrates that the College has successfully engaged with a major private sector organisation in a way that has enhanced the reputation of BFC with BAE Systems, the trainees on the PCFS and a major local University. The professional response to the tender process, combined with the very positive feedback about the College from both BAE Systems and the trainees, clearly demonstrates good practice with regard to employer engagement within the sector.

3. **What are the subjective views and experiences of students on this new programme?**

   Trainees were all very positive about the PCFS. They considered the induction course at BAE Systems and the College to have been very thorough. Trainees also stated that the integration between their BAE Systems’ work and their College work was very good. Trainees considered the training they were receiving from both BAE Systems and BFC to be of a high standard and that through the experience of being a trainee on the PCFS, they had developed a strong loyalty to BAE Systems.

As agreed at the beginning of the research, the draft report was presented to a senior manager at BAE Systems and his feedback was integrated into the report. It was agreed that the report incorporating his feedback could be published through the usual CEL publication procedures. In addition, BAE Systems asked that a second report with an appendix including an expansion of the analysis around Emergent Issues be given to BAE Systems for internal discussion and training.
Conclusion

The findings from this brief research project reveal that all the trainees are extremely positive about the PCFS. The scheme is already very successful. The key attraction for the trainees was that the scheme combined work experience with studying for a degree. They were confident that completing the scheme would provide them with excellent long term career prospects within BAE Systems. Trainees felt that they had integrated well into their work teams and they identified strongly with BAE Systems. All the trainees talked about the supportive culture within BAE Systems that encouraged staff to feel part of the company community.

In relation to the degree element of the scheme, trainees were all very happy with the quality of teaching, the standard of work they were doing and the facilities at BFC. Although they had never considered completing a degree at an FE college, all the trainees were very positive about their experiences whilst at the College. The one issue highlighted by both the trainees and teaching staff at BFC was that students had struggled to understand the difference between the level of analysis for an essay written at ‘A’ level and an essay written for degree level. This had been overcome by increasing the level of support given by BFC tutors.

One of the key requirements for the BAE Systems managers was that the PCFS should attract mainly locally recruited employees, who, having been assisted in attaining the required academic qualifications would provide the company with a growing pool of talented employees. The successful outcome would be the recruitment and retention of well qualified, highly committed employees who had a deep understanding of the BAE Systems culture, products and working practices, and who felt a strong sense of loyalty to the company. Research interviews with trainees confirmed that they had already developed a strong sense of loyalty to the company and that they were all considering a long-term career within BAE. Therefore it can be said that, at the time of completing the interviews, this key objective of the PCFS was being met.

During research interviews, three issues which required clarity were highlighted by the trainees. These are: (a) the completion of college work in company time and the granting of study days; (b) the calculation and application of performance related pay; and (c) overtime requirements for trainees. As the scheme progresses the level of work within BAE Systems work teams is likely to increase and the level of difficulty within the foundation and degree level coursework at BFC will also increase. Accordingly, as the PCFS is now commencing its second year, we suggest that it would be of assistance to both the managers and the trainees if a more consistent approach was applied in these three areas.
References


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Further Information and Contact Details

This is one of a series of research reports carried out for the Centre for Excellence in Leadership. If you have any enquiries regarding this report, please contact:

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We recognise that there are many innovative and effective leaders and leadership practices in the Sector that warrant investigation, analysis and wider dissemination of best practice. We would like to engage with existing networks within the Sector and develop a wider practice-led research community contributing to current debates on leadership and other related issues.

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