Employer Engagement in the Further Education Sector

Dr Simon Kelly
Research Publication Notices

Research Reports

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Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank all the research respondents who willingly gave up their time to participate in this research project.
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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 organisations 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.
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-organisational relationships between further education colleges and employer organisations.

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-organisational relationships are managed in practice. By exploring the voice of college providers, assessors and employer organisations, 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.

This project was carried out over a six month period, therefore 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.
Research Methodology

The project employed face-to-face semi-structured interviews with participants from the further education (FE) sector, employer organisations, and related organisations and agencies. With the permission of participants each interview was recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed for later analysis. All interview material is subject to a strict set of ethical guidelines and all participants were asked to provide written consent for their material to be used in this research study.

By conducting face-to-face semi-structured interviews rather than telephone interviews, surveys, or questionnaires, the aim of the study was to give a voice to those currently working in FE on employer-facing activities. Given the short time frame for conducting fieldwork the researcher considered it more important to allow those working in the sector to partially shape and direct the course of each interview so as to gauge the issues that matter most to them. This was to avoid potentially closing off relevant avenues of inquiry by asking closed questions, or requiring participants to construct their responses around predefined questionnaires, or survey categories. This methodological approach draws on the researcher’s own experience of conducting ethnographic studies of educational leaders, and interview-based studies of complex organisations and institutions (Kelly, 2005, Kelly et al, 2006a; 2006b). It is guided by the researcher’s own interest in the value of ethnomethodological and anthropological approaches to organisational analysis – including a focus on the local activities of organisational members, and the value of observation and storytelling in social science research (Kelly et al, 2005).

Data Collection

The research was conducted in eight FE colleges across the north of England. Interviews were conducted with those working in business, or workforce development units within the college. Additional material was collected from interviews with college principals, assessors, sector agencies such as the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), and employer organisations. Table 1 provides an anonymised list of the range of participants included in the research. All names of individuals, FE colleges and employer organisations have been changed throughout this report to ensure confidentiality to all participants.
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Introduction: The Politics of Employer Engagement

In a series of white papers the Government recently outlined measures for reforming secondary and further education across the United Kingdom. The aims of these reforms are twofold: 1) to increase the knowledge, skills and life chances of 14-19 year olds in full-time education and 2) to up-skill and educate adult learners to a minimum standard by 2020. The realisation of this twin strategy relies on raising the standard and range of traditional college-based educational courses, and providing greater ‘off-site’ or ‘work-based’ education and training opportunities for both young people and adults. As well as widening the vocational choices available to learners, the reforms are also designed to encourage employers to take a more active role in the training and development of learners by working with colleges in the implementation and delivery of recognised training programmes and qualifications. As Prime Minister Tony Blair stated in the forward of the March 2006 white paper on further education, the driving vision of these reforms is a commitment to putting the “needs and interests of learners and employers at the heart of the system”. And as the Education Secretary Ruth Kelly stated a year earlier, “today’s teenagers are tomorrow’s parents, entrepreneurs, public servants and community leaders, so the stakes could not be higher” (DfES Feb 2005: 3).

The stakes for such reforms are indeed high, as are the expectations placed on further education colleges and other learning providers to turn these policies into workable and effective practices (Macleod and Hughes, 2005; Chapman, 2006; CBI, 2006). As such, accompanying these policy visions are a series of measures designed to reform and restructure current vocational and employer-facing frameworks within secondary and post-16 education. These include the retraining of teaching and lecturing staff in specialist areas of vocational education; the increased responsibility for schools, colleges and other providers to attract and collaborate with local employers in the delivery of a wide range of vocational courses; and the setting up of new initiatives such as Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs), National Skills Academies, and more recently skills brokerages such as Train to Gain, to engage directly with employers in specific industrial sectors. In doing so, it is hoped that work-based and vocational programmes will provide learners with greater career opportunities and life skills, and employers with a flexible and highly skilled workforce.

As the many policy publications above state, employer engagement is an important and pressing issue for further education. Working with employers can allow colleges to extend their influence outside of the boundaries of the bricks and mortar college by allowing teachers and assessors to work directly with the local community. For employers, greater engagement with colleges provides an opportunity to train staff to recognised national educational standards via a trustworthy and recognised educational institution. In addition, employer engagement potentially allows employer organisations to actively shape and contribute to the kinds of courses their local college can deliver. As the Foster Review of Further Education (DfES, 2005), the National Employers Skills Survey (LSC, 2005), the FE White Paper, (DfES, 2006) and the recently completed Leitch Review (HMT, 2006) all suggest, an employer engagement agenda is vital for providing further education with a clearer mission and focus by addressing the educational needs of local people and businesses whilst also addressing the wider economic and social challenges of up-skilling the UK population to recognised minimum standards.


2. Due to time constraints this research project 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.
Although realising this policy is a burden shared between secondary education, sixth-form colleges and higher education, arguably the greatest responsibility has now been placed on further education. The unique position of FE as a provider of post-16 full and part-time education, foundation level, degree level and vocational qualifications means that local colleges have access to communities representing all social, ethnic, and economic backgrounds across the UK. As such they represent the most visible and measurable lever for change for the Government in its attempts to address national deficits of basic and key skills. These new responsibilities for FE, however, have caused some to question the viability of placing so many expectations on an already stretched and reform fatigued arm of the learning and skills sector.

As Jethro Marsh argues in his article for FE News in June 2006:

"Is it wise to presume a compatible and mutually reciprocal relationship between business and further education institutions?"

"Businesses exist only just as long as they function well as businesses. Therefore their core concern must remain their profit margin. A healthy company is able to train the staff within its control; but the emphasis for an employer will not be meeting a target set in Whitehall".

Instead, Marsh suggests that perhaps:

"...it is time to approach the subject in a more removed fashion. Perhaps it is time to ask whether FE is being asked to be all things to all people. Is it being asked to be a meeter of targets from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), an engager of employers for their skills needs, a tool for inclusion, for development, for the economy, for literacy, a tool to repair the damage done by education neglect of the past at the same time as a tool to build stronger supports for the future? [...] Whatever the solution may prove to be to the issue of both engaging employers and tackling a skills gap legacy (albeit a shrinking one according to the latest National Employer Skills Survey [NESS]), the course to be run would be smoother if all the motivations were understood; be they educational, political or financial in origin".

The research that informs this report has sought to address this final point, what are the educational, political and financial motivations for engaging with employers and are these motivations adequately understood by all parties involved? As this report will suggest, recent moves to restructure the funding of training and the availability of funds by employers and providers alike has been well received by college providers. These funds have helped to bolster existing arrangements between Regional Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs), college providers, intermediary agencies, employers and employees. However, the research also suggests that much of the work accomplished by colleges – particularly prior to 2006 – to engage with and build long-term relationships with each of these parties remains largely ignored against the wider contemporary agenda of employer engagement. As such, colleges are often perceived as sleeping giants that must attempt to ‘keep up with’ or ‘respond to’ the needs of employers. This perception of FE as unresponsive and out of touch is often at the expense of a more nuanced understanding of how the recent agenda has complimented, rather than replaced, existing practices and attitudes within FE. By providing a voice to those in FE who are currently working with employer organisations, this report seeks to introduce a counter-point to these popular but potentially misleading perceptions of employer engagement in the FE sector.
Employer Engagement in the 1980s and 1990s

There are a number of claims made about the role of FE in the recent reforms and white papers concerning further education, chief among these are that further education colleges need to be better equipped to deal with the needs of employers. Accordingly, colleges are not currently able or willing to engage with employer organisations at both a local and national level. The research carried out for this report suggests that this general perception of FE may be misleading. Of the eight colleges included in this study all have a history of employer engagement in their local area and/or region, and for many, this dates back at least a decade.

Take the following extracts from interviews carried out with various Business Unit staff:

AJ: ‘Because this college is a big general FE college it’s always worked with employers. And originally, pre-NVQ days there was lots of day release activity that went on with employers, in a not dissimilar way to what goes on now’.

SK: ‘Are we talking kind of early 1990s or 1980s?’.

AJ: ‘Late 1980s, early 1990s, and at that point in time the college had an employer liaison team. Not dissimilar to my team now except that someone like Val wouldn’t have been devoted to my team she’d have had half her time in the team and half her time teaching in her home department. But we had this team of eight, people all from different, departments who worked together to work with employers and did it back in their areas. That got disbanded and we went down the separate business unit model. So we became a separate business unit and we developed a curriculum sort of linked to that’.

Another Business Unit Manager states:

TK: ‘I’ve been doing this five years and I think Kim was doing it three so about nine years ago, so quite early on’.

SK: ‘Right, before this really become high on the political agenda?’.

TK: ‘Oh yes, we’d been doing it a lot longer before. Having said that my role as it was then, working in IT, and I’m talking, I’ve been here, this is my 19th year. For the last 18 years I’ve worked with companies doing company IT training through the college’.

And another adds:

MP: ‘In 1995 I started with a team of people where we said ‘right, we’re not going to do this, we’re going to employ people from a specialist area and we’re going to train them to access’, and the embryonic versions of what you’ve got here evolved from that. And a lot of it was ‘suck it and see’, some didn’t work too well and some did. But eventually we cracked it and we cracked it to a degree that we had something that was feasible and would work. And we started providing the service in NVQs that were local, i.e. I worked in [name of town] we delivered a service, in the workplace, as long as it was in [name of town], so people were not involved in overnight stays, they weren’t involved in excessive travel and they were in niche areas that were daytime type of work. So no one was being asked to work beyond five o’clock at night either, so they didn’t do evening shifts and stuff like that’.
In each of these cases working with employers is seen as a traditional and necessary part of the mission of FE to engage with the local community. Generally the colleges that participated in this research described the same incremental approach as in the above extracts. Engaging with employers provided the college with addition funds through full-cost work. A historical feature of this relationship for many colleges was the provision of training in the use of information technology as described by TK in the second extract. Such training in the early and mid-90’s provided colleges with a means of selling pragmatic and timely training to employers through which other college courses and products could then be introduced. As one college Business Development Manager stated to the researcher, “You don’t go in selling courses...”, and as another added:

GW: ‘If you go out on a sales call to visit an employer you’re not going with a bag of qualifications to sell him, you’re going to sort of try and tease out what his requirements and business needs are. And that’s the conversation you’re having, not ‘would you like to buy six of...?’.

This sensitive approach to employer engagement parallels the experiences of many other colleges interviewed who concur that employers in the later 1980’s and 90’s have traditionally preferred a short-term and pragmatic approach to training mainly through IT training and software accreditation courses. Business Managers like GW above have then used this initial interest to then explore other possibilities for training with the employer. This ‘foot in the door’ approach was also accompanied by another avenue of engagement with larger employers through company training officers and Trade Union Learning Representatives through which a wider range of employee centred educational courses could be offered.

Prior to the formalisation of employer engagement in national policy, colleges would attempt to build links with employers through full-cost training and education courses by working with company training officers, or more commonly with Trade Union Learning Representatives. In line with the holistic people management approaches of the 1990’s, employers would be encouraged by Union reps to provide morale boosting development courses for employees in areas unrelated to the business itself. As JF, the business manager of a college below describes, her first day at her new college brought with it a whole raft of training challenges from one such company via its union representative:

JF: ‘I come along to the new job that’s now become a full time post […] and the first week I was hit with putting on a scuba diving, advanced driving, Italian, Spanish, guitar playing, web/internet and I can’t remember what else all for one company […] Their employees paid half and they paid half. It was a contribution that was expected and the college paid the other half, it was like two quarters and a half’.

SK: ‘And what prompted the employer to contribute to all of these courses?’.

F: ‘It was personal development. It was sold on the basis that you will motivate staff and you will keep staff if you give them something they want rather than something you want them to get. So it was the hobbyist, you know, there was a mixture of all sorts of trades. And we ran them for three years very successfully after I took over. So they’d had funding and then they didn’t but they carried on with that and even for my first three years we were still running those’.
SK: ‘So who was responsible for bringing that work to you?’

F: ‘It was the union that brought them in, that encouraged us to go and talk. The unions were the people that were instigating the training with the management backup. But it was the union person, they didn’t have union learning reps then it was just whoever managed the union office that did all the organising within the company. We’d go down with a stand and be there, y’know, six o’clock in the morning for the morning shift and lunchtime when they’d finished and meet the next one and then evening and the same thing. And we’d just be there for that one day on those three sessions but we’d leave everything around and it was up to the union rep then to collect the information, collect the money, make it come off the pay. There was a lot of admin that the company had to do to run these and the union girl just said I’m sorry I haven’t got the time anymore’.

The lack of time available to trade union learning representatives to organise and manage training with colleges was cited by a second business manager of another college as the main reason why there has been a steady decline in the demand for training courses from a local hospital. Given that this hospital generally manages in-house training for its own staff, the college has lost considerable business because of the apparent pressures placed on union reps in recent years. The status of the Union Learning Representative in the employer engagement relationship (particularly in large public and private sector firms) is certainly an area that future research should investigate further.

This brief introduction to some of the workforce training and development activities prior to the launch of the employer engagement agenda in 2006 gives some insight into the historical relationship between colleges and local employers. What the new 21st Century concern with employer engagement has encouraged, however, is a specific focus on the business needs of the employer and particularly smaller hard-to-reach businesses that recent reforms of the sector have been designed to meet. More specifically, the ‘hobbyist’ approach to personal development as cited above has now been replaced by policies designed to encourage a stronger entrepreneurial attitude to workforce development and workplace skills among colleges, employers and learners.
Drivers of Change: Employer Engagement Today

When considering the role of FE colleges in the employer engagement agenda today it is important to also consider the radical changes in funding that have accompanied the need for colleges to improve their employer responsiveness. As such, employer engagement is not simply a matter of choice for colleges; it represents a significant shift in Government attitude to the role of further education in the UK economy; a role that FE cannot ignore in the present political climate. As a team of business development managers in one college explained, the recent funding changes have had a significant impact on the college’s approach to adult learning and the expansion of what this college terms ‘business services’:

A: ‘Its changes in funding as well, we’re having to look around to different types, you know, more full cost funding. Well, that’s what we do, because we’ve had funding cuts from the LSC, as other colleges have’.

T: ‘Post 19, adult learners, they cut our numbers hugely two years ago […] it was a nationwide cut. It affected all colleges and they didn’t tell colleges until July for an August start’.

SK: ‘Did this also affect 14+?’.

T: ‘No, post 19 […] 19+, adult learners’.

SK: ‘Right’.

T: ‘Numbers were cut’.

A: ‘And the bulk of our learners actually at the college are 19+. So it had quite a big impact’.

As another interview with the Director of a regional LSC confirmed, this cut in funding is a deliberate attempt nationally and regionally to reshape and redirect the mission of further education away from adult and community learning and towards learning for employability and skills. For FE colleges this means entering a market environment which up until now they have been somewhat protected from:

LSC: ‘…we do need to, sort of, segregate in relation to, you know, there is a 14-19 agenda and then there is an adult agenda’.

SK: ‘Sure yes’.

LSC: ‘And the adult budget that colleges get - which is probably 4 billion of the 10 billion - but 40% of the total budget for adult training - increasingly that is being squeezed. One is to give entitlement to level two, but on an employer’s premises; skills for life but for employers. It’s that employability element that increasingly is there, whereas perhaps colleges were focused on widening participation in relation to adult…’

SK: ‘Adult and community learning?’.

LSC: ‘Absolutely. And it was very much adults who basically were not always in employment, y’know, it could have been professional people who were just professional attenders of courses. So it’s a refocusing of that adult agenda very much to help the productivity gap for the UK. And therefore from an adult budget it’s focused on, as I say, those entitlements to Train to Gain - a contestable budget. So open competitive tendering will continue to increase over the coming years so that if the colleges can’t respond to employment another organisation will be given the opportunity to fill that gap’.
In the learning and skills sector the other organisations that could fill this gap are invariably independent commercial training providers and consultancies. Up until now, these organisations have co-existed with FE colleges by providing specialist training in areas of technical skills such as construction, computing, engineering, health care and so forth. With the introduction of contestable funding these smaller providers can bid for funding previously unavailable to them. The contestable funding structure is in the form of the recently launched Train to Gain brokerage service which operates nationally, but can be accessed by employers through regionally contracted Train to Gain brokers. This contestable funding is both the pressure and the incentive for colleges to take employability, skills, and employer engagement seriously as a mission for the sector. This agenda will also be supported by the introduction of a new standard for business engagement soon to be launched by the National Learning and Skills Council. According to the LSC, this standard will incorporate and eventually replace existing business standards such as Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE), and Action for Business Colleges, to become a national ‘kitemark’ accreditation for employer responsiveness and vocational excellence in the sector. In short, the changes to adult funding, the setting up of Train to Gain and, perhaps most significantly, the establishment of a New Standard for employer-facing and vocational training means that FE colleges can no longer ignore the significance of employer engagement. These radical changes in the funding strategy of FE have also caused some to question the impact of these changes for the mission and identity of FE within the learning and skills sector. As this college principal commented to the researcher:

J: ‘I think they’re right in the assessment of the skills gap, absolutely and I think Leitch has actually demonstrated it in his interim report. But also it was known in previous reports and surveys that the Government have done. So I don’t think anybody is quarrelling about that. Its some of the implications, some of the assumptions on which the way forward that the government are proposing is based which have implications and which may be challengeable. And I think those assumptions are based in deep social and economic stereotypes, prejudices and so forth. So I think there’s some really deep stuff behind all of this as there is in any country. So for instance in looking to fill the skills gap the Government are defining the role of further education as being an economic role pretty exclusively. They say other roles as well but as you know it’s an economic role. And then they go further than that because they don’t define their terms very clearly, they say it’s an economic role, it’s an employability role, it’s a skills role, but they used those terms interchangeably, but they are not interchangeable [...] colleges are historically associated with the vocational education and the skills route [...] so by brandishing these marketing terms, the government is seeking to brand colleges as the ‘skills sector’. Some people in the sector welcome that, some of us don’t at all. And one of the reasons we don’t welcome it is because we’re educationalists and while we recognise that skills are a part of education, it’s only part and it’s not the whole. And there are other important purposes for education which are at least as important as that. So in terms of core principle admission, we wouldn’t want to be branded as exclusively the skills sector. We would want to be something broader than that’.

3. Train to Gain was officially rolled out in September 2006 with an annual budget for the first year of £230 million. This budget is set to rise each year reaching £427 million by 2008. Source: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2006_0161
Against this political, historical and financial backdrop, employer engagement has arguably become less about providing what employees want in the spirit of holistic staff development (as described earlier), and more about delivering the harder economic incentives for training employees to the standards demanded of the employer in an increasingly competitive skills-based market. What this research has found in particular is that colleges that have a history of employer engagement activities have developed this in response to local circumstances and pressures from competing colleges and other providers. However, as the short case studies that follow demonstrate, it would be misleading to consider this a reactionary approach to working with employers. Rather, it may be more useful to conceptualise this as the product of a set of historical, financial and geographical contingencies that have led a particular college to form a certain strategy and approach to employer engagement. Most importantly for the colleges examined in this study, these contingencies pre-date the national employer engagement and skills debate. As such, the recent reforms and focus on employer engagement tend to have complimented an existing framework rather than triggered a new response. In this way, colleges might be better characterised as entrepreneurial when it comes to employer engagement rather than simply responsive or reactionary.

What follows are two short case studies that illustrate some of the innovative approaches to employer engagement encountered during the research. These are presented here as snapshots of more complex organisational arrangements, each of which can be examined in greater depth in future research.
Case Study 1: Finding a Niche Market

Calendar is a general FE college operating in a small town in a rural area of northern England. It is one of three other colleges in the local area and is in direct competition for full-time students with both. In the past decade the college has faced the threat of merger with one of its larger competitors and in response to this realised that it had to supplement its struggling full-time student numbers with a unique and fresh source of income. In 1999 the college employed Phil, a former lecturer who had developed a successful business unit at his previous college and who was persuaded to bring some of his team and his ideas to Calendar to take charge of a new Innovation Unit. For Phil and his team the idea of employer engagement as ‘innovation’ is a central part of their employer engagement strategy and commercial identity:

SK: ‘So you’re the Business Development Manager?’.

Phil: ‘Innovation’, ‘there’s a subtle difference, it’s not just a title […] in 1999 I came here, to this college, to set up that type of approach. My teams used to be in the main college and some were in another site and when we set it up it was a bit disjointed and we started looking at ways in which we could move out beyond the local territory. So we started doing stuff regionally’.

As Phil goes onto explain, in order to find a unique employer market - one that was free of any existing college or provider competition - it was necessary to look outside of the immediate area and to the wider region. Acting on criticisms made by the Local Learning and Skills Council that colleges in the area weren’t providing enough employer training opportunities, Phil and his team contacted their local LSC directly to find out exactly what demand for training there was. As Phil goes on to explain in his own words, this led to the college developing a reputation for offering high quality and tailored training to a diverse group of employers:

Phil: ‘Because [name of town] is a small town, compared to [names of towns] we just couldn't rely for our long term viability on the type of commercial market we were likely to find in such a small place. So we would say ok if they want cleaning for example in [name of nearby city] and [name of college] can’t or won’t meet that need we’ll do it. So very quickly the LSC cottoned on to this, so whenever they got approached by an employer saying ‘we need a service, our local college won’t do anything’, they started sending them to us. So we built up from that’.

SK: ‘Right. So did anyone approach the LSC to set this up?’.

5. All names of colleges, organisations and institutions are fictional to ensure the anonymity of research participants.
Phil: ‘Yes, because the LSC at the time were promoting their wares as they would normally do and so they’d go, they’d have breakfast meetings they’d have all sorts of events in hotels where they’d invite people from the construction industry, or the IT industry, or wherever. And these people would say ‘well yes, fine well and good, but you keep saying we can but no one will come to us, we’ve got to go to them’. And lots of firms didn’t like that because they’re saying ‘it impacts on our productivity, it costs us, it’s not just the fee for the training but we’re losing people for days and weeks at a time which isn’t productive to us’, yes?’.

SK: ‘Yes’.

Phil: ‘Plus there’s resistance from people who perhaps had a bad time at school who think ‘bloody hell, I’ve been sent on a course and it will be a load of crap’ and they’ll be there for three days, so it wasn’t popular, it wasn’t a popular option at all. But when we said, ‘no, we’ll come to you and we’ll fit it in just before a shift starts or at the end of a shift, so its least inconvenience for the candidates’, the employers think ‘brilliant, I’m not losing them away for days at a time’. So it very quickly became a more attractive option. And then when we started saying a lot of this delivery we’ll do during the work day but it will be done unobtrusively by assessors observing and doing that so that they’re still doing whatever they’re doing. If they’re working on the bins then our assessors will go on the bin round with them and they’ll be talking to them while they empty the bins and doing that. So there’s no interference at all then with the job’.

For the Senior Management Team at Calendar, focusing on employer engagement in the late 1990s as a means of keeping the college financially independent began to pay off. With the arrival of Phil and the freedom given to him by the SMT to set up and manage his own Innovation Unit, he was able to seek out unique employer engagement opportunities. Unlike his immediate competitors he took the decision to employ teams of assessors rather than using existing college lecturing staff. This move meant that he could take on training from any industrial sector, no matter how specialised, and employ the number of assessors required to deliver the relevant qualification. With his own knowledge of regional and national employers, Phil was also careful to seek out specialist work in industrial sectors that would require repeat training – either because of continually changing work standards, or because of the industry’s high turnover of staff and the need to continually train and assess newcomers. This was the case when Phil expanded the role of the Innovation Unit to assess drivers for a national bus company who happened to operate in the local area of the college:

Phil: ‘Once we started doing that with the bus companies we found, we started off with [name of company] who are local based, but [name] are a division of [a national bus company] and of course when the divisional managers met their colleagues and said ‘I’m really struggling to get training’, the people from [the local company] said ‘piece of piss, ring Calendar College, they’ve done ours no problems’. So by word of mouth we then got [another local division] on board and then a number of others. And then we got to know the personnel people, so we approached [name of company] nationally and said ‘look you want a service, you want everyone trained whether they’re in Eastbourne or Newcastle, you want them trained to the same standards and the same way. We can do that. We could work with you to develop a [name of company] model of this and we can emphasise the bits in the qualification that you’re interested in’ - which in their case happens to be customer service – ‘and we’ll do that’. So they agreed that. We then went to speak to the national office and it became a national contract’.
This same model of using the Local LSC to find suitable industrial sectors and then working locally to gain a good reputation by word-of-mouth, has worked for Calendar in many other industrial sectors. Now they have permanent teams of assessors who work in a separate unit outside of the Calendar College site providing regular training and assessment to NVQ Level 3 both locally and nationally in the following industrial sectors:

- Land Transport (including buses, trams, coaches, rail and taxis)
- Cleaning (including industrial cleaning, waste management and recycling)
- Health Care
- Security, and
- Horticulture

Perhaps most significantly Phil also has a position on the Calendar College SMT and so has been able to ensure that his targeted strategy for employer engagement at both local and national level fits within the larger aims of the college. This has also meant that he was able to lobby the college to invest more of its funds in specialised training facilities to take advantage of new niche markets. At the time of interview in November 2006, Phil and his team had just created a new on-site training facility for the assessment of plumbers, painters and decorators, and electricians. The purpose of the centre is to take advantage of new technological developments arising directly from concerns about global climate change.

For example, plumbers are increasingly being asked to fit more economical domestic condenser boilers, but few firms have the specialist skill to install and maintain them. For painters, particularly those employed by large firms, the use and application of heat reflecting paint requires specific knowledge and skill. And finally, there is increasing commercial and domestic demand for the installation of wind turbines to save electricity, yet very few firms have any experience installing these new technologies. As Phil explained, the wind turbine in particular poses a challenge since installing it correctly requires the technician to not only make sure the electricity supplied by the turbine is fed to the user, but that any surplus electricity produced can also be fed back into the National Grid, thus saving the user extra money.

Each of these highly specialised and emergent technologies requires high quality specialised knowledge both to gain a qualification and to assess others. As Phil has found, his innovative approach to employer engagement also a means he has to continually broaden and expand the skill base of his own assessment team as well as that of his clients. Through his own innovative approach to seeking out and producing niche markets, and the continued commitment and support of his college, Phil has given Calendar a national reputation for high quality tailored industrial training alongside its traditional educational role in the local community.
Case Study 2:  
Cross-college Employer Engagement

Whereas Phil and his team at Calendar College were given the freedom by the SMT to seek out markets and training opportunities across the country, few other FE institutions can take the same gamble in giving employer engagement such a high profile to the potential detriment of full-time courses. Fortunately for Calendar its decision paid off due to the establishment of long-term local and national contracts, and the recent surge of national interest in specialised workforce training and skills. However, like most of the colleges in this study, Calendar's change in strategy in 1999 was a direct consequence of unusual and, in this case, quite desperate local circumstances. Unlike Calendar, however, most colleges still consider full-time education to be their *modus operandi*, and one which still provides the largest income. This means that employer engagement for most FE colleges means finding a way of fitting workforce training and assessment into existing academic arrangements within the college.

This is the case with Ledbury, a large general FE college that serves a similarly large north of England city and the surrounding suburban and rural areas. Although traditionally specialising in sixth-form education, the college also has a wide range of faculties and departments that provide full and part-time vocational courses, apprenticeships, adult education and workforce training. The college has had a business unit in operation since the late 1980's and as a large college on the outskirts of a large city, it has always engaged with employers. As Business Services Managers Anne and Val explain:

Anne: ‘At that point in time the college had an employer liaison team. Not dissimilar to my team now except that someone like Val wouldn’t have been devoted to my team she’d have had half her time in the team and half her time teaching in her home department. But we had this team of eight, nine people all from different - we were departments in those days - all from different departments who worked together to work with employers and did it back in their areas. That got disbanded and we went down the separate business unit model. So we became a separate business unit and we developed a curriculum sort of linked to that didn’t we?’.

Val: ‘Yes, it was quite a specialised curriculum’.

Anne: ‘Yes, we developed a specialised curriculum, but as the business training grew we did work with the academies as well’.

Val: ‘Yes, because what I think you might find in other organisations where there’s this distinct business unit is that they’ve either got one of two things going on: they’ve either got a very niche provision and they say all we focus on is doing ITQs, or whatever, and we don’t bother the rest of the college and they don’t bother us. Or the position that we found ourselves in is to become a growing unit and all of a sudden you stop finding things that are niche provision and you’re coming up with employers who want some of the core provision. And that creates then some tensions in the organisation about who’s going to deliver it, what the service level agreements are. Who’s letting who down? Who’s stepping on whose toes? So we’ve been through all that’.

Unlike Calendar College that provided niche training as a physically and symbolically separate part of the college, Ledbury had to develop its Business Services provision within the historical arrangements of a successful academic college. This meant that rather than hiring in assessors, they were contractually obliged to employ existing lecturing staff to conduct on and off-site assessment work as part of their regular teaching load. Initially this meant working closely with faculties to make sure that suitable lecturer/assessors had hours available in their working week to deliver training. Depending solely on academic staff also meant that most of the training had to be delivered on college premises, which in turn limited the range of business services the college could offer to employers.
Anne: ‘Then [in 2003] there was another strategic decision taken which says you’re going to be a separate, very separate business unit, you’re going to be a college company, [Ledbury] College Business Services Ltd, and you are only going to deliver full cost work’. Oh good’.

Val: ‘That wasn’t our most successful period’.

Anne: ‘That wasn’t our most successful, however we did do it, we did pick up the challenge and we did it. However, the tensions Val described immediately came to the fore in that we were dealing with our employers but we could not satisfy all of their requirements. They were back elsewhere in the college. Because of the division of being seen as very separate to then get that work service was impossible’.

SK: ‘Yes, because of the tensions?’.

Anne: ‘Because the tensions yes, and it just wasn’t happening and we were trying to do it ourselves and we couldn’t be everything to all men, and we couldn’t access funding. And out of all that mess came our proposals that we would go for the model we’ve got now: ‘We’re not going to stay in this company’, looking at where work with employers is going, looking at some of the work that was done in the South East on Action for Business Colleges, that sort of stuff. We put together a model that said ‘we want to be the cross college support team. You lot have all this’, this delivery that I was hanging on to as commercial manager, which went from things like electrical training, health and safety, forklift truck, care courses’.

Val: ‘NVQs’.

Anne: ‘Management training, meat and poultry NVQs, a real bag. The offer was that ‘your departments became academies, the academies then get all this [employer training] back, we’ll be a central team and we’ll help you keep going with what we’ve given you and help you grow that work with employers’. And that, for us, it was quite fortunate that at the same time the national agenda for colleges and working with employers was going down the same route’.

Again, unlike Calendar’s approach of creating a separate and independently managed Innovation Unit, Ledbury went from being a small business unit, to gaining independence as a business services company within the college, to then deciding to centralise business services and make each faculty, or academy, responsible for its own delivery. This radical structural change was necessary for Anne and her team since the Business Services Company could not seek contracts with employers and manage the pool of part-time lecturing/assessor staff at the same time. Managing marketing and supply and demand across such a large college was impossible, and the quality of service to the employer was suffering. As such, Anne lobbied her college Principal, who in turn brought the matter before the senior management team (SMT). It was this decision, along with the support from senior managers that allowed the existing relationship between the business services unit and the academic staff to flourish:

Anne: ‘The main thing that enabled it was support from the top, was winning the mind of the Principal, nothing else. We were plugging away at it, we were working you know across the college with people we knew and oh yes it was all da-da-da-da. But what we were trying to do was get the real support from the top so that the things we were doing and the meetings we were holding and all the rest became part of the college infrastructure. And we’re not an add-on, we’re not something else happening separately, we’re part of the college’s day-to-day business’.
‘And how was the case put to the Principal?’.

I think it probably wasn’t just one case. I think you know in some respects it is about chipping away, it has been about, as Anne said, playing with the players but then using some of these things as platforms for success. And also the Principal at the time was also a very, very well read person and so would have been probably more aware than any of us round this table of what was coming in the national agenda’.

But had also been responsible for us being separate in a business unit’.

Oh yes’.

Again, the history of the college plays a significant part in shaping the organisational and strategic possibilities open to Anne, Val and the Principal. Since the Principal had been responsible for creating a separate Business Unit years before, he now had to take responsibility for making employer engagement work in his college. And as Anne adds, it was perhaps no coincidence that his decision to radically restructure and reapportion responsibility for employer training from a separate unit to the college faculties, came just prior to the changes to adult and community learning funding and launch of a national FE agenda for employer engagement. Ledbury is now in the advanced stages of its cross-faculty employer engagement strategy. It still relies on lecturing staff for most of its training, but they are now able to expand their provision to more off-site and specialised training through the employment of full-time assessment staff from both inside and outside of the college:

‘Yes there are a number of hours that our full time lecturing staff are expected to teach. We now have assessors who are on some slightly, there are some slight different terms and conditions for assessors as opposed to lecturers’.

I think that as well that there are more of those staff who actually don’t just embrace working with employers out there because they have to, it’s because as they’ve started doing it they’ve realised that it’s what they want to do. And they’ve also appreciated some freedoms for them personally that come with that type of working. So the fact that there might not be a half-term in their calendar anymore, and if they choose to want to go away in term time that’s what they can do because they’ve booked it in with their employers’.

As Anne explains, Ledbury is now in its second year of cross-college employer engagement and is supported in its endeavours by the availability of Train to Gain contracts through the LSC and the promotion nationally of employer engagement within FE:

‘Employer engagement is now a cross college activity that is supported by the employer engagement team. And so each delivery area of the college has got work that it does with employers but works with the employer engagement team centrally to support that work. Not in delivery terms but in marketing, promotion, contract management all that sort of thing. So we’re like the cross college support team and we’re in our second year of working that way. And to help with that, within each delivery area of the college that are called ‘academies’, there is a head of provision with responsibility for employer-client engagement’.
Having grown from a small business unit, to an independent college-based company, and finally to a cross-college employer engagement support team, Anne and her team at Ledbury are now in position were they can experiment with more risky ventures such as attempting to engage with smaller employers:

Anne: 'I think what we also try to do is, its easy dealing with big employers in a way where you can have discrete provision for them, but working with small and medium sized employers is obviously one of the challenges as well we've got to deal to with. So alongside that sort of activity that we've been talking about, going out in the workplace, discrete stuff, we do manage a sort of portfolio of open provision that small employers can access [...] Its an ongoing thing, engaging with them more and more of them, is obviously part of the current agenda. But this idea of, y’know, of things that they can access, part of the Train to Gain initiative is about the brokerage service, looking for hard to reach employers. It’s very simple to work out that hard to reach employers would tend to be small employers. And then the next stage is that what you'll find is ones and twos. Cracking how you’d cope with ones and twos from small companies is the next challenge really'.

Anne: ‘We’re better at it in some areas than others at the minute. But that is a challenge. And one of the examples where we’ve done that, one of the new area’s we’ve brought into Train to Gain this year has been motor vehicle and there’s lots of good examples there of the changes we’ve been talking about. One was that the Dean [of the academy] recognised they had to get into Train to Gain. And he recognised that he’s going to have to take a risk because he hadn’t got staff appropriate to go out into the workplace. So his conversation with me was if I take on an assessor can you find the workload for him? And the answer was yes, but we’d done that and we’ve found that workload, but the workload are people from small garages all across [the region]. For the assessor it’s not viable for him to go and deal with them all one to one all the time. So we’ve come up with a hybrid model there where instead of him going out all the time, there’s certain times they come together in the college, they get a benefit from that and then he does do some assessment in the workplace and that model fits, we’ve devised that model to fit small businesses'.

Both Ledbury and Calendar share in common the tension between the desire to innovate and the need to work within the historical, financial and political limits of a traditionally academic institution like an FE college. However, despite the common perceptions and stereotypes of Further Education, organisational and educational innovation in this largely academic environment has not been an insurmountable problem. With the support of senior managers, and the ability to find innovative approaches to developing (and in some cases creating) training opportunities and markets, these colleges have made employer engagement work for their college both ideologically and financially. It is important to note, however, that as with all the illustrative examples in this report, colleges are not merely ‘responding’ to employer’s needs. Rather they have sought out innovative and creative ways of attracting the attention of employers and agencies like the LSC to also shape the kinds of services employers might want. In effect then, colleges in this study have actively produced the demand for workplace training and education to which the employer can then respond.
Rethinking Employer Responsiveness

There is a popular perception that further education colleges are unresponsive to the needs of employers. This assumes three things:

1. that colleges are presently unaware of the needs of employers;
2. that colleges are unable to meet these needs; and
3. that employer’s themselves have explicit training needs and that these needs are being clearly articulated to a largely passive learning and skills sector.

This report suggests that point’s one and two are not evident in the materials collected by the researcher. Therefore, it is perhaps point three, the role of the employer that demands greater consideration.

Certainly in the illustrative examples already discussed, larger employers (particularly public sector organisations) have very clear and long-standing training needs. They have a large turnover of staff, greater mobility across the organisation, and continually changing standards for training and accreditation. As this research has demonstrated, however, such organisations either have their own in-house training (as with many hospitals and health authorities), or they already work closely with college providers. What may be missing from the employer engagement debate, therefore, is an account of the role of small and medium sized employers in engaging with further education. There is an implicit understanding in recent publications that the burden of establishing engagement falls to FE. Yet, what this research has demonstrated is that FE colleges are only now advanced enough in their employer engagement provision to devote their resources to smaller employers. The problem facing many, however, is that the employers themselves are not convinced that they will benefit from training.

Take the following experience of an NVQ assessor of business administration at one of the colleges studied. MB has been an assessor for six years and she currently assesses Business and Administration to NVQ level 3 for NHS and private sector clients. Her current case load includes a pet food company; a recruitment agency; a chain of travel agencies; a community health centre; and a psychiatric hospital. In her experience employer engagement, even at the employer's own premises poses a significant challenge:

SK: ‘Why do you think the candidates you assess have decided to do an NVQ?’.

MB: ‘I don’t know why they’re doing it, and some of the employers themselves take zero interest in the NVQs at all. The majority take very little interest. I think it’s the candidates themselves who’ve seen it advertised or they’ve seen a flyer come through or they’ve taken a telephone call from [the business unit] and they’ve asked to do it because it’s free […] I mean employers are all quite happy for the candidates to do the NVQ although they don’t sometimes give them time to come away from the workstation so you’re assessing, you’re doing it on the hoof really because they’re answering the phone, they’re dealing with visitors. There’s nobody to cover for them so I can take them away from their desk, so they’re not supporting them in that way. They’re allowing them to do it, but most of the written work they’re doing at home, and no employer has ever come to ask me how they are getting on. I mean I do, if I see them I tell them that nobody has ever actually come to me and asked what are they getting out of this, how are they getting on? There’s just no interest at all’.
As MB explains, in her experience it is the learner in small and medium sized firms that often initiates contact with a college, and only indirectly via the employer themselves. Often candidates worry that they haven’t got qualifications for the job they are currently doing, and so gaining an NVQ is a way of demonstrating their current competencies rather than about learning new skills. This is akin to conducting a skills audit, or having a kind of skills passport that can be used to gain the same level of employment in other firms. Most significantly for MB, the main point of contact she has with small and medium sized commercial employers is the candidate themselves rather than management, a training representative, or HR officer.

A second interview was conducted with a representative from a regional Tourism office responsible for managing the training needs of the hotel, catering and tourist industry across the region. One of her main responsibilities is to identify potential training needs in her sector and to work with external funding bodies and FE providers to supply an appropriate training provision. As with the college assessor, the researcher asked her about the role of the employer in employer engagement:

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**SK:** ‘So what is the employer perception of a college and the FE sector at the moment?’.  
**DC:** ‘I would say it’s mixed and I think what you’ll find is that from those that are actively using the colleges at the minute there’s a very good perception. Its those that used the colleges years ago and haven’t used them since, they’re maybe put off by them because they were old fashioned and the lecturers weren’t made to go out and do training, etc., so they were still working in the dark ages’.  
**SK:** ‘So they haven’t used colleges since then?’.  
**DC:** ‘No - so they have had no opportunity to have their perception changed. Unfortunately I would say that a few of the employers feel that colleges are still old fashioned and not delivering what they need, which is a shame because if you ever get a chance to dine in [name of college] restaurant it would be the equivalent of you eating in the rosette restaurants. And it’s the same with the other colleges as well its fantastic’.  
**SK:** ‘Is there a pattern in those that tend to work with colleges and those who have this old fashioned perception in terms of what FE provides?’.  
**DC:** ‘I would say it’s predominantly the larger employers that will use colleges and the smaller employers tend not to’.  
**SK:** ‘So we’re talking the smaller bed and breakfasts and the like?’.  
**DC:** ‘Yes’.  
**SK:** ‘Because that must be a very hard sector to manage?’.
DC: ‘Absolutely yes it is. I mean you know you can ring a B&B operator up and say you’ve got a customer service course, or whatever, and they can have answered the phone with a ‘yep’, so you’re thinking ‘oh cool this is a good one’. And then they say, ‘no I don’t need that we’ve run this business for 14 years and I know what I’m doing thanks love’. Well not any more, you know, everything has changed and you can’t carry on operating the way that you did do when you first started the business [...] So I think the larger employers are more responsive to training. I think for several reasons, one is they’ve possibly got more opportunity to release staff to go on training courses. Secondly, they themselves have perhaps got a HR person in place who is identifying training needs and stepping back and thinking yes we need to do this and develop training programmes. Thirdly, the larger businesses tend, no - I have to be careful what I say - but the larger businesses tend to be more the professional businesses because they’re having to compete harder. If you walk along one of the streets in [name of town] at all the B&Bs, a lot of them just rely on someone walking past on Friday evening with a suitcase and looking for the first vacancy sign and going and putting their head down there. So it’s a totally different ball game for the smaller businesses. That’s again generalising because they’ve got a lot of very, very good small B&B operators who do a lot of personal development and that sort of thing’.

For DC, the further education sector faces a significant problem with small and medium sized companies. There is still a perception of FE colleges as old fashioned and unresponsive. Yet as DC explains above, it is this perception which is out of date and which needs rectifying. Unfortunately, the responsibility for this again seems to fall to individual colleges, which themselves are unable to reach unresponsive employers until they have developed a training portfolio and provision large enough to employ specialist assessors who can go into the local community to make tentative contacts with smaller firms. This is certainly something that FE colleges are prepared to do, as soon as they are equipped, as Anne in Ledbury College described earlier with their new approach to working with small automotive garages. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a battle of perceptions being played out across the sector that further education appears to be losing. As Anne and Val added towards the end of their interview, there is a ‘myth’ surrounding FE that needs to be challenged at the highest level before colleges can build relationships locally with a wide range of employers:

Anne: ‘It’s a lot of myth’.

SK: ‘Where do you think that myth has come from?’.

Val: ‘Or from whom has the myth come from? I think what you might do is you might look to key voices and decision makers, whether those be such as the CBI (Confederation of British Industry) or you know, just to name just one really good example that you will have heard on the press, whether it’s coming from a source like that making an off the cuff comment without necessarily having been around and really travelling round for good examples. If you get to the point of talking to employers certainly on our patch, and I’m sure on other people’s patches as well, what you will find is that there still exists some frustrations in terms of ‘I don’t understand the funding’ and ‘we thought we were on that initiative and now we’re on this’, but you’ll find a lot more responsiveness than is perhaps depicted in national documentation’.
Anne: ‘It’s not the responsiveness that’s the problem really is it? I mean when you look at the sort of CBI and you hear these quoted figures that only a small percentage of employers deal with FE.’

Val: ‘15%’.

Anne: ‘That 15% are very happy dealing with FE and keep coming back to deal with FE.’

SK: ‘Is it perhaps more about getting employers to see the benefits rather than FE having to adapt to the needs of employers?’.

Anne: ‘I think probably both’.

Anne: ‘I think it is both. I think it’s perhaps weighting a little bit to that way about perceptions. Because what we find is once you can get at the employers and build a relationship with them, usually they’re happy to come back. And they’re happy that as a college you’re seen almost as an honest broker and that you’re dealing, you’re going to give them the best deal you can at the time, which isn’t perhaps always the perception of some private training institutions. So I think it’s, you know, that’s the sort of weighting on it. That’s fair isn’t it?’.

Val: ‘I think that’s very fair and I think that, it’s like any other business in any country of the world, people do business with people and that’s the strength of our college or any other college that’s doing well with employers. It’s about the people to people connections and what I know is that if you did go and talk to employers for whom this college serves within the first minute or so of the conversation even if you’ve not named names they would name the name of the person with whom they work at the college. And its back to that, ‘yes I work with this person’. And it’s the same, if you listen to them, it’s the same when they talk about say Business Link. If you go to the employers and you say what are your opinions of Business Link they’ll often come back with an answer of ‘well you know John does this for me or Amy, you know we work well because, Anne or Simon does this well for us’. And they answer, the question hasn’t been personal but the answer comes back personal and that’s where the connections are. So yes I think nationally it is an unfair depiction of FE, but unfortunately it’s one that some of the big players listen to. And fortunately when they come out to colleges like ours and lots of others, not just us, their eyes are opened, but they’re opened perhaps within the confines of our small world in the north of England. What we need is more of that to be fed back’.

Anne: ‘And it’s about raising the awareness though. For example you can drive past this college next week when all our full time students aren’t here and the car park will be half empty and the perception is, ‘oh, they’re off on holiday’. What they’re not aware of is that we’ve got a whole team of assessors out in the workplace, still delivering to this college’s learners in the workplace irrespective that its half term. But you can’t put a sign up that says actually we are still working, and it’s a perception thing’. 
The concept of leadership in this research context needs to be treated with caution. This is why leadership has thus far remained a background feature of the research. As the researcher has discussed at length elsewhere (Kelly, 2005; 2006a; 2006b; 2007), the academic and professional literature on the subject has yet to adequately define the term, and there are still fundamental questions to be researched and addressed regarding leadership training and development (Barker, 1997). There is also the added dilemma that leadership, particularly in the public sector, can sometimes be characterised as a ready-made solution waiting for a problem to solve. Therefore, this report has sought to avoid the temptation to explain the findings of this research in terms of a particular style of leadership - good, or bad. It has also tried to avoid recommending a particular brand of leadership both as a solution to employer engagement and as an analytical device for examining the research data. This is because without treating the term carefully, questions concerning leadership can colour the analysis of research material and in so doing actively shape the nature of the ‘problem’ to which leadership can then be applied. The result is that leadership as explanatory concept quickly becomes the dominant ‘figure’ set against the less important ‘ground’ of the research setting (Kelly, 2007).

This research has taken a subtly different approach by putting the ‘ground’ before the ‘figure’ by seeking to describe (rather than explain) employer engagement as it has been described to the researcher by those working in the sector. It may therefore be worth noting that ‘leadership’ is not part of the vocabulary of this research setting as described by college staff, employer organisations, assessors, or indeed, members of the local LSC. It is therefore no coincidence that the term ‘leadership’ has yet to appear in any of the data presented in this report. However, what this research report has described are some of the complex inter-organisational relationships that make up the employer-engagement relationship - the setting up and maintenance of which requires certain skills and abilities on the part of participants. Most notably, it requires the collaboration between partners working within, across and beyond the boundaries of the further education college (see also Kelly, Dec 2006).

This report recommends more research into the history and organisation of this unique and still emerging sub-sector within Further Education before any strong models of leadership are applied or prescribed. There is certainly evidence in this short research project that collaboration and collaborative learning (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Kienle and Wessner, 2006) may be a more suitable analytic unit than perhaps models of transformational or even distributed leadership. However, the primary challenge of researching this setting is in understanding how partners as diverse as the DfES, the LSC, Sector Skills Development Agencies, Ofsted, ALI, Business Link, Connexions, Protocol, College Business Units, SMTs, academic departments, freelance and contracted assessors, independent specialist providers, trade unions, HR managers, Tourist Boards, Regional Health Authorities, external examining boards, small and large employers and individual learners, all work together to implement, deliver, complete and monitor a diverse set of training courses. These are courses covering subjects from Leadership and Management itself, to how to install wind turbines. These are not transformations in response to strong leadership, and neither could they be adequately described as forms of distributed leadership, since it is not immediately apparent what kind of leadership is present and how it is distributed, and to where or whom. Rather, each organisation leads and is led by the historical, political and economic constraints imposed directly and indirectly by the other. It is perhaps not how such relationships are led that is of most interest, but how a adequate balance between each partner and their associated constraints and needs is established and maintained long enough (and with considerable repair along the way) by each actor involved in the process. This research has examined the role of the FE college in this complex set of inter-organisational relationships, but future research should build on this to examine others, and in particular the role of the employer in shaping and enhancing employer responsiveness.
Summary of Primary and Secondary Research Findings

- Substantial and consistent cuts in funding for adult and community learning nationally from 2005 onwards, have led many colleges who had a significant ACL provision to consider other means of generating income for the college. Such financial pressures, whether local or national have created new organisational possibilities for business units within colleges to work with employer organisations.

- Such pressures have in some cases created a number of unique approaches to employer engagement including the creation of niche markets, tailored courses for specific industrial sectors, and new structural arrangements within the college itself.

- In the cases examined in this report, it appears that changes in the sector and in individual colleges have allowed for a more individualist approach to employer engagement, through which a vision or strategy of an individual or team can be implemented - so long as support from senior management is provided. The success of these individual strategies have led to further innovation and experimentation as business units gain the confidence and support of college SMTs.

- Unlike other academic faculties, the business unit within a college has the ability to produce a highly visible and measurable income for the college through funded and full-cost work. As such, business units in recent years have a powerful means of demonstrating their effectiveness to the college SMT. Given this it may not be surprising that such units are able to innovate in ways that are difficult, if not impossible, for traditional academic departments to emulate.

- As funding for employer engagement did not become available until the establishment of Employer Learning Pilots and the official launch of Train to Gain, colleges were forced to seek full-cost work with employers which often meant working exclusively with larger employers, often in the public sector. This may explain why smaller so-called ‘hard to reach’ employers have, until recently, not been targeted by FE colleges.

- As some colleges became more sophisticated and successful in their employer engagement activities, many develop links with public sector organisations and agencies as a means of consolidating workplace training contracts. Through this many colleges have accessed other sources of funding such as the European Social Fund (ESF). One college in particular relies on this money over Train to Gain funding, due to its success at winning tenders with its partner at the regional tourist board. As such, future research should include an investigation of the various funding routes available outside of Train to Gain through which colleges and their employer-partners fund and operate workforce development programmes.

- Most colleges generally welcome the arrival of Train to Gain funding in the form of LSC funding contracts. However, many are critical of the complex and unreliable brokerage service which employers have reported to have found confusing, and through which colleges in this study have received little direct training work.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Current pressures on colleges are many and varied and certainly the steady decline in funding for adult and community learning (ACL) has played a significant part in prompting colleges to seek sources of income outside of traditional academic teaching. What is common to each case is that strategic, structural and operational changes to these colleges towards an employer engagement or business services strategy occurred due to a combination of recent financial pressures and historical local circumstance. To understand how and why colleges approach the employer engagement agenda in a particular fashion demands a careful analysis of these local and historical circumstances. This is particularly important as the histories of each institution provide an important indicator for how each will respond in the coming years to the more explicit, politically important and yet arguably ambiguous employer engagement agenda currently being introduced by Government bodies locally and nationally.

In conclusion, although employer engagement is only just beginning to take hold as a new mission for FE at a national level, colleges themselves are not starting from scratch. Decisions, strategies and actions they take are part of a rich history of changes that will dictate and shape the response of the sector as a whole in the coming years. It is the recommendation of this research, therefore, that policy makers and initiatives like the Centre for Excellence in Leadership should seek to understand the regional and local circumstances that will shape the specific response of the FE sector to employer engagement, and to support and encourage innovative relationships and practices that are already in place. As the implications of recent changes in funding and the roll out of *Train to Gain* become more visible to the sector, a research informed approach to supporting employer responsiveness is essential for a sophisticated and long-term understanding of how the employer engagement agenda with influence and shape the delivery of further education locally and nationally.

It is the overall recommendation of this report 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. Future research in this area must also include a detailed investigation of large, medium and small employer organisations to assess and evaluate their own role in shaping and responding to the employer engagement agenda.
References

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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.

If you would like to receive further information on the Research Programme, please contact:

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