Research Paper 1

Innovative Approaches to Employer Engagement in Further Education

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Research Publication Notices

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Employer Engagement in the FE 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-organizational relationships between further education colleges and employer organizations. The key partners under study included:

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

Through a series of semi-structured interviews, the research project aimed to explore the everyday experiences and challenges of leading and participating in current workforce development programmes. In light of the recent reforms of the learning and skills sector, the project has also examined the perceived and actual roles and responsibilities of each of these partners, and how such complex inter-organizational relationships are managed in practice. By exploring the voice of college providers, assessors and employer organizations, the project provides the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL), the 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.
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.¹ 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.2

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 organizations to actively shape and contribute to the kinds of courses their local college can deliver. As the Foster Review of FE (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.

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 reformed fatigued section 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.

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.
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 working paper 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, this 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 organizations, this working paper seeks to introduce a counter-point to these popular but potentially misleading perceptions of employer engagement in the FE sector.
A Historical Relationship with Employers

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 organizations 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 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 follow 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, 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.
As the Business Unit Manager of a second college 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 needs and requirements and business needs are. And that’s the conversation you’re having, not ‘would you like to buy six?’

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 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, advance 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, y’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 union 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 organize 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 in this area should consider.

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 existence of a 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.
Drivers of Change: from responsiveness to engagement

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 the 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 organizations that could fill this gap are invariably independent commercial training providers and consultancies. Up until now, these organizations 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

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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.cq?pn_id=2006_0161](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cq?pn_id=2006_0161)
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:

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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.

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*See LSC website: [http://www.newstandard.co.uk/](http://www.newstandard.co.uk/) for more details on the New Standard.*
Against this political, historical and financial backdrop, employer engagement has arguably become less about providing what employee’s 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 organizational 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:

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 this 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?

Phil: Yes, because the LSC at the time were promoting their wares as they would normally do and so they’d go, they’ve 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.
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 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 (incl. buses, trams, coaches, rail and taxis)
- Cleaning (including industrial cleaning, waste management and recycling)
- Health Care
- Security
- 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 from concerns with 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 a high quality specialised knowledge both to gain a qualification and to assess others. As Phil has found, his innovative approach to employer engagement also 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 industrial training alongside its traditional educational role in the local community.
Case Study 2:  
Cross-college 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 employer 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 must find a way of fitting 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 they're this distinct business unit is that the provision, 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 who's 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 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 staff at the same time. Managing marketing, 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-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.

SK: And how was the case put to the Principal?

Val: I think it probably wasn’t just one case. I think you know in some respects it is about, y’know, it has been 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.

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

Val: Oh yes.

Again, the history of the college plays a significant part in shaping the organizational 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:

Anne: Yes there is 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.

Val: 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 with FE:

Anne: 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 sort of 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, you 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 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, unlike many of the common perceptions of FE, being
innovative in this 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. Instead they have sought out innovative and creative ways of attracting the attention of employers and bodies like the LSC to also shape the kinds of services employers might want.
Conclusion

Although the political agenda of employer engagement is only just beginning to take hold as the new mission for FE at a national level, colleges themselves are not beginning from a position of ‘unresponsiveness’. Decisions, strategies and actions of colleges in the 21st Century 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 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 FE colleges 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 further education in the coming years.
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.

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