Research Paper 2

Barriers to Employer Responsiveness in Further Education

Dr Simon Kelly
Research Publication Notices

Research Reports

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Introduction

This second of two Research Papers is based on a six month investigation of how further education (FE) colleges in the north of England are responding to the employer engagement agenda as outlined in recent government and sector publications, and as represented by national restructuring of funding for vocational training and workforce development. The study comprises semi-structured interviews with college managers and staff responsible for the delivery of workforce development. This primary evidence is supplemented with additional interviews with employer organizations and intermediary sector agencies. As the first Research Paper in this series stated, 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. Colleges that participated in this research described an established historical relationship with local and national employers which in most cases span at least a decade. Colleges also demonstrated 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 is that many of these innovative structural and operational arrangements pre-date the recent Government-led employer engagement agenda, and as such cannot be adequately defined as a ‘response’ by the sector. Instead, a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the FE sector and employers is required. This second Research Paper provides the basis for such an understanding by exploring the unique challenges and ‘interpretive barriers’ facing FE college providers in their attempts to engage with small and large employer organizations.
The Challenge of Employer Engagement

The structure and organization of Further Education colleges themselves deserve some consideration if employer engagement is to be understood in context. For instance, although college departments may engage with employers in variety of ways, these departments do not necessarily do so in a coherent and centralised manner. As such, engagement can be highly fragmented with different parts of a college dealing with different employers. Departments that manage work-based learning for 16-19 year olds, for instance, might not communicate directly with Skills for Life (S4L) Officers, or the college business development unit. Similarly, placements for full-time vocational courses can be managed entirely within an academic faculty and not include or inform the business services, or business development arm of the college of their involvement with local employer organizations.

In some cases colleges do not have a centralised business development unit and instead employer engagement is spread over a number of different departments. An example of this taken from this research study is a college in which only one curriculum department is directly involved in any kind of workforce development. In this case it is the IT Curriculum Team that provides part-time computing courses and software accreditation for local companies. Even as the only direct form of workforce development, these courses for practitioners only form one part of a wider set of modules for full-time academic students delivered by the curriculum team. At the time of interview the college was due to appoint a Business Development Manager to centralise employer engagement across the college, or as the IT Curriculum Leader put it:

“...the new BDM is expected to come in and change the world”.

At present companies generally contact the college directly to enrol staff on specialised computing courses and, according to the IT Curriculum Leader, when a request comes through:

“...whoever’s got the smartest suit goes out”

In order to liaise directly with the customer. Therefore, although the college has a vision of employer engagement promoted by senior managers, according to this interviewee such visions are not at presently supported by funding and as such the college does not have a ‘public face’ for companies to approach to enquire about training:
“We [the IT curriculum team] attended a course, a CEL course as it happens, we made a plan and this is where we are – things have got put on the back burner and no one person has taken it forward.”

(IT Curriculum Leader).

This lack of communication and centralisation when dealing with employers is a common complaint among staff whose job involves some kind of employer engagement, or workforce development, in a college environment which is still largely concerned with the delivery of academic education. In one such college, the Business Unit Manager claimed that:

We lose so much business because of academic staff communicating with businesses. You wouldn’t believe it, but we’ve had cases were a company rings the college and gets put through to the staff room! […] we’ve also had companies telling us that they tried ringing the college in June and were told to ring back in September!

It would seem that for many working in an FE college environment, the main challenge of centralising employer engagement activities is through the development of a consistent and accessible public face of employer engagement within the college. In some cases centralisation can mean something as practical as having a Business Services reception area; a section of the college website devoted to workforce development; and a switchboard through which employer enquiries can be logged and immediately passed on to BDU staff. Although in several colleges even arrangements like this – particularly having space on the college website – has met with opposition from the larger academic community within the college who perceive employer engagement as a less important college service.

One way of overcoming these organizational barriers is through the purchase and implementation of cross-college contact databases that can, in principle, be accessed by all college staff to add and update any contacts and correspondence between the college and an employer. One such ‘contact management database’ available on the market is Goldmine™ and is used with some success by one of the five colleges under study.
As this team of business development managers explain:

A: We have a Goldmine, what's a technical term for it?

T: Database

A: Thank you. Customer database with, oh gosh, I think it's about 7000-8000 companies on it.

T: Yes and we can break it down into subsections as well and target a particular area. So [...] I can say to the admin team right this needs sending out to the [Business Services] database and they can break Goldmine down into that kind of focus. So you can focus contact.

S: Right, yes. I've come across Goldmine, I've only come across one or two databases, Goldmine seems to be the most popular.

T: Goldmine is good.

For these two managers, the database provides their department with ‘live’ information regarding any contact made with employers by their own department, or by anyone else in the college. Also, providing the information is inputted correctly, Services to Business staff should have full details of employers including contact details and a complete historical record of the employer’s involvement with the college – even if this contact is simply a request for a college leaflet or prospectus:

A: Let's say there's 6000 on there now, if I go back downstairs and somebody new has contacted me for some information, even if it's just to send a leaflet, we'll enter them on Goldmine and we'll keep building it up like that. So it could be an individual at a company or it could be a company contact. And it all goes on Goldmine.

However, the successful use of such databases outside of the Services to Business Unit is dependent upon overcoming the organizational and political boundaries of the college. As with the problem of internal communication already discussed, one of the biggest problems facing Business Services in this college is in gaining the cooperation and support of staff from traditional academic faculties from across the college. In particular, getting other members of
the college to recognise the importance of a business image and the ‘brand value’ of the
Services to Business Unit:

SK: Right, so will this information be added to the database if the contact is
made through full-time vocational courses delivered in another part of the
college?

A: Technically it should be, all staff have access to the database in one format
or another on the staff intranet. We are working towards getting staff outside
of Services to Business to use it, that's just a cultural change that's ongoing.

T: It is, I mean the people who have just joined with this huge expansion have
come from more traditional faculties really and one of the things we've done is,
I've run three workshops now, four workshops, to enable them to get to grips
with what is it about being a business and the brand and the services to
business brand, what are the values that are driving us to sort of do that
cultural change stuff […] We would hope down the line that anyone who has
contact with a potential employer or a customer will put the details onto
Goldmine.

For the IT Curriculum Leader, the BDM, and the Services to Business team above, the barriers
to working effectively with employer organizations stem from the institutional culture of further
education. According to these respondents, the values and routines that characterise working
life in a further education environment can jar with the customer-driven focus of the Business
Unit. Indeed, several of the staff from college BDUs interviewed for this study saw themselves
as a small business that happens to exist within a college setting. In other words, the values,
routines and working timetable of traditional FE are something to be tolerated and managed,
rather than something that can enhance employer engagement. It is interesting to note,
however, that the two managers presented here do not see their position as a small commercial
enterprise within a public sector environment as contradictory to the overall mission of the
college:
T: In an FE full-time environment you know you’re teaching your 23 hours, you’ve got your admin, where’s the room for everything else? Whereas we don’t have that, we have a kind of, we make our work up as we go.

A: We do but we also, we challenge. If there’s a policy or procedure there we challenge why we have to do it rather then whinge and moan and accept it. Whether or not we are successful in our challenge is immaterial but you know, I mean my admin it’s streamlined to the bone, I don’t do it for the sake of doing - some people don’t do it at all.

T: Absolutely

A: Its making ourselves organised, the policies and procedures in a business-like profession. I always call it the private sector we’re in and if we had more of that throughout the college we’d be a phenomenal force.

In summary, an initial analysis of the delivery of what is termed here ‘workforce development’ suggests that there are several significant barriers to successful collaboration between business development units and the rest of the college. These barriers seem to stem from the different and sometimes opposing identities of what is seen as ‘traditional FE’ and the private sector identity and commercial zeal of those employed in business development units. These ‘interpretive barriers’ (Dougherty, 1992) are significant when understanding the emergence of operational barriers in relation to the introduction of the new funding structure and particularly the LSC New Standard for employer engagement – both of which will help to define what counts as the appropriate form of ‘engagement’ for colleges, and how FE colleges should orientate all their departments and faculties around the employer engagement agenda.
When interpretive schemas become interpretive barriers

A theoretical approach that can be applied to the study of employer engagement is to treat each perspective encountered above as part of an ‘interpretive schema’ used by policy makers and practitioners to make sense of and account for the world in which they live and work. Rather than a ‘perspective’, the notion of an interpretive schema allows one to understand and appreciate the shared meanings, identities and languages through which individuals, groups, departments, institutions or even entire sectors draw upon to identity themselves and separate others. The notion of interpretive schemas has already been applied and developed in the study of work organizations (Daft and Weick, 1984), religious institutions (Bartunek, 1984) and product innovation (Dougherty, 1992). It is a means of shifting the analysis of complex organizations away from a more ambiguous concern with ‘culture’, or an individual concern with cognition, to one that examines how collective ways of seeing, or comprehending the world are expressed through language and social activity (Bittner, 1965; Douglas, 1987). The notion of interpretive schemas can provide insights into some of the tensions between different professional groups working within the same FE college as described above. More importantly, identifying schemas and how they operate can allow the researcher, or practitioner to understand how such competing schemas can inadvertently become interpretive barriers.

Take the following extract from an interview with the Business Services Manager at one FE college:

S: So do you employ any lecturers?

P: No I won’t have them, I won’t have them, I refuse to. I just won’t entertain them.

S: Why is that?

P: Because they have no, they’ve got no credibility with the client. One of the big problems, one of the reasons FE has a bad name I think is if you’re going to train a bus driver and you send a guy in a suit, yes, instant barrier for a start. And then within two minutes the driver has sussed out you’re an academic, you’ve read all this in a book, you’ve never driven a passenger vehicle so what do you know about the bus industry? You don’t know about the culture in the canteen, you don’t understand about the fiddles and the dodges and dives and signing each other in and clocking each other out and all that, they just have
no context. One of our lads goes along and when the drivers are giving their war stories he gives his and very quickly they think ‘oh right, this guy knows what he’s talking about, he’s been there, he’s done that, literally bought the t-shirt’. And when our lads turn up they go smart but they don’t, they wear a tie and a shirt, but as you saw today, they’ll have a reflective jacket, they look like another driver, like a driver would, so instantly there’s that camaraderie - that its one of us telling us rather than some bloody outsider who doesn’t know his arse from his elbow. They use the same language as the drivers.

As this extract demonstrates, successful employer engagement here is reliant on the Business Unit Managers’ and Assessors’ sophisticated understanding of the interpretive schema involved in being a competent ‘bus driver’ in this firm. For these drivers there are certain features of appearance, conduct, language and knowledge that any outsider must demonstrate if they are to gain legitimacy and credibility in this organizational setting. Breaching any of these features can mean losing the respect and attention of those being assessed. In this case, and as ‘P’ states above, academic lectures don’t have credibility with this particular client. Tracing out the interpretive schemas that make one a legitimate ‘policy maker/implementer’, ‘college principal’, ‘business development unit manager’, ‘academic’, ‘assessor’, and so on, not only provides a detailed understanding of each of these groups, but more importantly it helps to determine the reasons for barriers and tensions between these different groups. As Deborah Dougherty has demonstrated in her own analysis of product innovation in large firms, significant problems arise in large-scale organizations when interpretive schemas become interpretive barriers. According to Dougherty this can happen through a combination of the following:

1) different groups and departments can exist in different ‘thought collectives’ (Fleck, 1935), or ‘thought worlds’ (Douglas, 1987), through which work is carried out in parallel, but with little concern for the shared outcome;

2) Organizational routines and work practices that help to constitute each world also serve to further separate each from the other – further constraining any collaboration, or joint learning over time.

Most importantly, as Dougherty concludes, overcoming interpretive barriers requires cultural and not just structural solutions:

Innovation requires collective action, or efforts to create shared understandings from disparate perspectives. Advocating rational tools and processes; the infusion of market research information; and the redesign of structures, while important, are not enough. (Dougherty, 1992: 195)
Competing visions of engagement

Arguably one of the most persistent interpretive barriers in FE is the assumption on the part of policy makers that 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 employers themselves recognise their own training needs, and that these needs are being clearly articulated to the FE sector. The Final Report and Research Papers published from this project suggest that points 1) and 2) are not in evidence in the materials collected in this study. Therefore, it is perhaps point 3), ‘the role of the employer’ that demands greater consideration.

Certainly in the illustrative examples already discussed here and in Research Paper 1, larger employers (particularly public sector organizations) have very clear and long-standing training needs. They have a large turnover of staff, greater mobility across the organization, and continually changing standards for training and accreditation. As this research has demonstrated, however, such organizations 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:** So why do you think the candidates you assess have decided to do an NVQ?

**MB:** I don’t know, I don’t know why they’re doing it. I do ask them why they’re doing it. Some of them, the employers themselves take zero interest in the
NVQs. The majority take no interest at all. 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.

MB: 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 them to take them away, so they’re not supporting them in that way. They’re allowing them to do it, but most of the work they’re doing at home, most of the written work they’re doing at home. And no employer has ever come to ask me how they’re 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, or a training representative, or Human Resources 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:
SK: So what is the employer perception of a college or the college 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, the lecturers weren’t made to go out and do training, etc., so they were still working in the dark ages. So they haven’t used colleges since then. So then they’ve had no opportunity to have their perception changed. So 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’. And 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 (see Research Paper 1) 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 or y’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: And 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: So 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 it's

Val: It's 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, and 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. And unfortunately it's one that some of the big players listen to. And fortunately when they come
out 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.
Conclusion

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 geographical, economic and social 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 nationally and locally.

It is the overall recommendation of this Research Paper 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 organizations to assess and evaluate their own role in shaping the employer engagement agenda.
Selected Reading

Barker, R. (1997) How can we train leaders if we don’t know what leadership is? *Human Relations* 50: 343-362.


DFES (November 2002) *Success for All: Reforming Education and Training*.


DFES (March 2006) *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances*.


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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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