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Strategies for Effective HE-Employer Engagement

A South West Higher Level Skills Pathfinder Research Report.

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February 2010

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Many thanks also to all the people and institutions who contributed towards this research. In order to protect their confidentiality they have not been named however without their support we would have been unable to proceed.

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Reports and resources

HLSP research reports can be downloaded as follows:

- *Employer Engagement with Higher Education: A literature review:* http://tinyurl.com/yfac68w

- *Employer Engagement with Higher Education: Defining, Sustaining and Supporting Higher Skills Provision:* http://tinyurl.com/yzac8qp

- *Strategies for Effective Employer Engagement:* http://tinyurl.com/ydnfmu4

For a full set of reports and outputs from the South West HLSP please visit:
http://tinyurl.com/y9h6pao

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Executive Summary

1. This report summarises the findings from a series of 10 case studies of how higher education (HE) institutions are developing and promoting their strategies for engaging with employers in the development of higher-level skills. This is the third in a series of research reports compiled for the South West Higher Level Skills Pathfinder Project.

2. Findings from this project have been grouped under five main headings: the strategic purpose of employer engagement (EE); supporting and resourcing EE; structures for teaching and learning; communicating and embedding an EE approach; and changing contexts for EE. The first of these sets of issues can be considered as the bedrock/foundations of EE within an HE institution (HEI); the next three as supporting columns; and the last one as the roof and future direction (see Figure 1 below). Each of these will now be briefly described in turn.

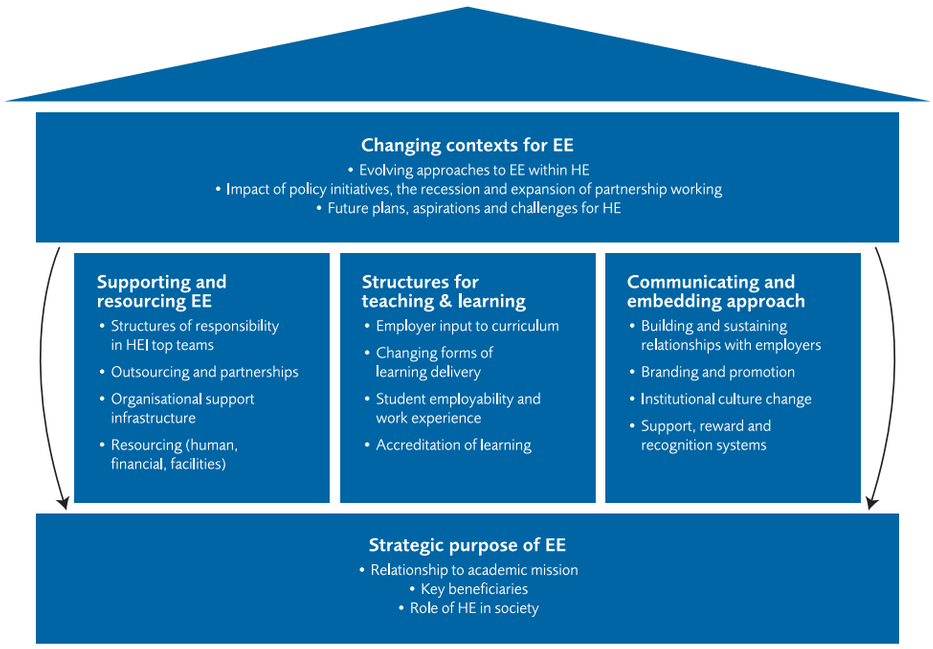

Figure 1

3. **Strategic purpose of EE:** Findings from this research indicate that active engagement with employers is regarded as a core aspect of the academic mission within all types of HEI. It is regarded as contributing positively to all forms of education, not just CPD and workforce development, and as forming a key pillar of the student experience and employability. EE is also regarded as integral to research, offering access to research sites, funding, dissemination, knowledge transfer (KT) and impact. HEIs, however, regard their relationships with employers as wider than simply 'business'. They certainly see public sector and third sector employers as key players as well as the private sector. EE is also about the wider community and social contribution of HE, not just meeting the skill needs of employers.

4. **Supporting and resourcing EE:** In terms of supporting and resourcing EE there was a recognised need for EE to be promoted as a priority from the very top of the institution, yet integrated across a range of roles and functions to ensure wide scale engagement, endorsement and support. Successful EE requires a variety of centralised and decentralised support functions to absorb the increased administrative workload that EE initiatives tend to generate, as well as building and supporting relationships with employers, assessing employer needs and tailoring learning solutions to meet their requirements. Personal relationships between academics and employers are key to successful collaboration, however, and should be supported rather than replaced by institutional support functions. In order to meet the needs of employers HEIs may need to become more 'business like' in how they cost and resource EE activity in order to remain competitive and to ensure the long-term sustainability and viability of initiatives. Greater flexibility is required in planning, staffing and financial systems as well as the development of strategic relationships with other organisations (such as further education (FE), private providers, professional associations, etc.).

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5. **Structures for teaching and learning:** In looking at the impact of EE on teaching and learning it is important to recognise that engaging employers with HE is much broader than just tailoring courses for people already in work. Indeed, whilst some HEIs are not entering the workforce development market to a significant degree, all are greatly strengthening the work experience and employability of their students, and working closely with employers to achieve this. Increasingly the role of EE in teaching and learning is impacting on all areas of provision through the involvement of employers in curriculum design, course delivery, careers guidance, development of 'employability skills', work experience and student placements. There is also a widely recognised need for more flexible and responsive approaches to higher skills accreditation. The increasing emphasis on accrediting and recognising prior learning, however, carries substantial implications for programme administration, recruitment and progression; and the expansion and diversification of the student body places new demands on student support services. EE offers potential new progression routes into HE and a more holistic lifelong learning approach to study opportunities.

6. **Communicating and embedding employer engagement:** It can be useful to see EE not in terms of different activities but in terms of building different relationships with employers. Some HEIs are looking for wide ranging links with a limited number of large employers; others want to work with many employers. Some are working with global companies whereas others with local firms or regional economies. The issue here is how to build and maintain these relationships. EE is also seen as a way in which HEIs can differentiate themselves and create a strong external brand. However, employers and other stakeholders (e.g. learners) need to understand what offers lie behind the brand. There is also a need for messages about EE to be clear inside the institution. The top team need to help all staff understand what they really mean by 'employer engagement' and how big a change in the institution they are expecting. If significant change is required, it may help to use concepts of change management in implementing an EE strategy. Universities have not always been very good at having discussions and reaching clear agreements about individual and collective priorities and this is probably the most important aspect of culture change required by EE – and it is a change in ways of working not specifically in attitudes to employers. Progress is being made in recognising the work academic staff do in EE through supporting them better and giving them time or money for such activities. A major unresolved issue is whether academics who actively support the EE agenda will find their endeavours are also recognised in HE promotion systems.

7. **Changing contexts for employer engagement:** The key issue here is the extent to which EE within HEIs should be regarded as an evolving journey in which institutions have always aimed to address the needs of employers and society, yet adapted their approaches and positioning over time to meet changing academic, political and market requirements. Government supported initiatives for the promotion of EE in HE (such as the Higher Level Skills pathfinders) have been used by some as a stepping stone for significant development and restructuring of EE activity. Whilst they have been useful in developing capacity, however, some questions remain about the long-term financial sustainability of structures and employer demand for higher skills provision. HE-EE and the changing marketplace for higher skills are placing increasing demands on HEIs to collaborate in partnerships with other organisations and this shift carries a number of new and significant challenges for leadership of, within, and between organisations. Besides, a variety of strands of EE activity, in particular demand for executive education, CPD and tailored programmes, has been negatively affected by the current recession. In no case, however, was the downturn seen as an excuse for reducing EE, on the contrary, during this period HEIs are looking to retain and grow employer relationships through an expansion of the various ways in which they can collaborate.

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8. The report concludes with a series of tips, lessons and reflections on HE-employer engagement from this research. Advice from interviewees included the need for senior level support and endorsement from both HEIs as well as the organisations with whom they collaborate; the need for greater flexibility and responsiveness of academic, administrative and support processes; supporting, developing and rewarding staff for EE activities; building on existing institutional strengths and priorities; and establishing honest and trusting relationships between HE and employers. Key lessons and points for consideration are as follows:

    1. EE is core to the purpose of HE and always has been;
    2. The 'student experience' is a key driver for EE within all types of HEI;
    3. The success of EE is dependent on putting appropriate support systems in place;
    4. Workforce development is just one aspect of EE and not a priority for all HEIs;
    5. The involvement of academics is key to successful EE;
    6. EE requires culture change, but not of the kind so often assumed;
    7. Achieving successful EE is a major leadership challenge for HE.

A number of similarities and differences were identified between this and earlier research on the topic and a call presented for a more systemic perspective in which EE is regarded as a core and integral part of the education and research missions of HE rather than as a 'third leg' or additional activity (see Figure 2 below).

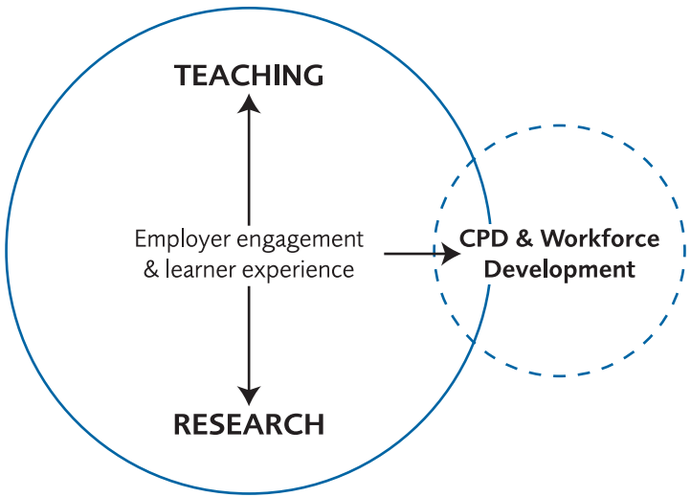

Figure 2

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1. Introduction

1.1 About this report

This is the third in a series of reports summarising the outcomes of research to support the South West Higher Level Skills Pathfinder Project[1]. The first of these mapped out the higher skills and employer engagement (EE) landscape as portrayed through policy and research literature[2]. The second summarised a series of in-depth case studies of EE initiatives in higher education (HE) to shed light on key facilitators and barriers as perceived by those people directly involved in developing and delivering projects[3]. This final report complements these two previous publications through a series of case studies of 10 English HE institutions (HEIs) on their institutional strategies to EE. Together these reports give an overview of the field of HE-EE and how universities and other HE providers are working with employers to address higher skills needs.

Key questions addressed within this report include:

- To what extent do institutions have a clear strategy for EE and how is this supported through organisational structures and processes?

- Is it possible to discern similarities and differences between HEIs vis-à-vis their approach to EE?

- How is EE communicated and implemented both for internal and external audiences?

- How are contextual changes impacting upon HE-EE?

Whilst it is expected that these issues are of relevance and interest to a wide range of stakeholders within HE, government/policy, skills and education more generally, this report is particularly targeted at those people working within HE who have a remit for EE and workforce development (WFD). These might include senior university leaders, academics, professional services managers and higher skills intermediaries/brokers. Some suggestions for practice and questions for consideration are given in Chapter 7.

1.2 What do we mean by employer engagement?

Over the past few years EE has come to mean a number of different things within HE and remains a somewhat contested area. UK government policy this decade, particularly since publication of the Leitch Report in 2006[4], has strongly encouraged the increased involvement of HE in 'upskilling' (and since the economic downturn 'reskilling'[5]) the nation's workforce. Recognition of the value of 'higher level skills'[6] as a key driver of 'knowledge-based' economies[7] has led to ambitious targets being set for enhancing the qualification levels of people in work in order to address the declining economic competitiveness of the UK vis-à-vis other nations[8]. Such calls have renewed interest in the issue of 'employer engagement' and have firmly associated it with 'workforce development' (usually through 'work-based learning' (WBL)) for people already in employment as part-time, mature students. From this perspective there has been much emphasis on 'demand-led' education whereby courses are adapted to the requirements of specific employers both in terms of content and mode of delivery (usually through flexible, 'bite-sized' learning, often in the workplace and/or outside of normal working hours). The call for demand-led provision has in part been addressed through the development of 'foundation degrees' (FDs) with a strong vocational dimension preparing people for specific occupations and/or industries, and the increased involvement of HEIs in accrediting existing workforce development by employers and/or other training providers[9].

1. One of three regional employer engagement pathfinder projects supported by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) from 2007-09. For further details please see www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/employer/path.
2. See: Bolden, R. and Petrov, G. (2008) Employer Engagement with Higher Education: A literature review. Compiled for the South West Higher Level Skills Project on behalf of HERDA South West and HEFCE by the Centre for Leadership Studies, University of Exeter. URL: http://tinyurl.com/yfac68w.
3. See: Bolden, R., Connor, H., Duquemin, A., Hirsh, W. and Petrov, G. (2009) Employer Engagement with Higher Education: Defining, Sustaining and Supporting Higher Skills Provision. A South West Higher Skills Project Research Report: University of Exeter and CIHE. URL: http://tinyurl.com/yzac8qp.
4. Leitch, S. (2006) Prosperity for All in the Global Economy – World Class Skills. Department for Education and Skills (DfES).
5. See, for example, House of Commons (2009) Re-skilling for recovery: After Leitch, implementing skills and training policies. First Report of Session 2008–09. London: House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee.
6. Defined as learning broadly equivalent to the first year of an undergraduate degree programme or above (National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 4 onwards) and covering a range of provision from non-accredited CPD through foundation degrees to postgraduate and professional qualifications (see King, 2007).
7. See BIS (2009) Higher Ambitions: the future of universities in a knowledge economy. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.
8. Initially set at 40% of the workforce with a minimum Level 4 qualification by 2020 (Leitch, 2006) but now revised to 50% of young people (aged 18 to 30) entering HE (DBIS, 2009).
9. See Bolden and Petrov (2008) for further details.

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In addition to the growth of educational provision for people already in work, in which many universities have long been engaged anyway (through continuing professional development (CPD), lifelong learning and vocational education, although not at the scale currently encouraged by government policy), EE carries a number of other connotations within HE and, in many cases, is regarded as a key strand of education and research strategy. In particular, universities have long regarded EE as a key element of ensuring student employability and a positive learner experience. With the introduction of fees for home students in England, reduction in maintenance grants and increasing international competition for high calibre entrants, the capacity of HEIs to demonstrate their contribution towards graduate employment prospects is a key requirement. Employability activities typically involve engaging with employers to secure student work experience/placements, work related input into the curriculum, and career development and recruitment activities[10].

Universities have also long engaged with employers for research activity – either through the provision of funding, access to research sites and/or the availability of specialist expertise/facilities. Postgraduate research study (including KTPs and ESRC Case Studentships) has also often included university-employer collaboration. Such research relationships can carry many benefits for both groups of organisations and remain a significant area in which HE can both influence and learn from what is occurring in the field of work. Knowledge Transfer (KT) through industrial/business research and consultancy is a further area that links EE to research and is an important area of consideration for many HEIs.

Each of the areas of HE-EE mentioned above are summarised briefly in Table 1. Within the current report we take a broad view of employer engagement, spanning all of these areas, as described by the interviewees in our study. It is important to note, therefore, that our focus is wider than that within much policy documentation, the reason being to illustrate how a diversity of EE activity can mutually support one another[11].

Type of engagement	Examples
Workforce development for people already in employment, including both 'reskilling' and 'upskilling'	- Standard or bespoke courses - Existing or development of new programmes (e.g. FDs) - Accredited or not - At very wide range of levels of expertise
Accrediting existing workforce development	- Awarding credits for in-house provision and/or work-based assignments
Employers supporting student employability	- Direct inputs to teaching and/or course materials - Careers work, often linked with recruitment activity - Work experience/work placements
Involvement of employers in curriculum development, often linked with wider engagement	- Employer research opening up new areas of research and teaching specialism - Employer participation on programme steering committees/development forums

Table 1 – Forms of employer engagement

Whilst this report considers EE in its broadest sense, however, the primary focus of this and the previous study (like the HLSP project of which they were a part) was on learning and skills rather than research, innovation and/or knowledge transfer (KT) activities. To this extent, whilst these broader issues are mentioned as appropriate a detailed analysis of these areas is beyond the scope of this project.

10. See 1994 Group (2009) Beyond the Curriculum: Opportunities to enhance employability and future life choices, for a recent report on this subject.
11. For further details see Bolden, Connor, Duquemin, Hirsh, and Petrov (2009).

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1.3 The research evidence

This report is based on analysis of interviews within 10 English HEIs to explore their approach(es) to EE. Participating institutions were selected to offer a broad cross-section of types and profiles as described below:

- **Location:** five of the 10 institutions were based in the South West of England. The remaining 5 were spread across England, including the North West, North East, London and the South East.

- **Type:** sample institutions covered a wide range of types and missions - five were post 1992 universities, four pre-1992 universities and one a university college[12].

- **Mission group:** of the pre-1992 institutions two were in the Russell Group and two in the 1994 Group for research-intensive universities. Of the remaining institutions three were University Alliance members, one Million +, one Guild HE and one non-associated university[13].

- **Size:** institutions ranged in size from under 4,000 to over 30,000 students, with a varying mix of undergraduate (UG), postgraduate (PG) and part-time (PT) students.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with between 3-5 key informants within each institution who were able to give an institution-level perspective on EE. Whilst the roles and titles of interviewees varied between sites they included the following categories:

- **Senior level institutional leaders:** Vice Chancellor (VC), Principal or Rector; Pro or Deputy Vice Chancellor (PVC/DVC) for Teaching and Learning, Employer/Business Engagement, and/or Research and Enterprise/Innovation.

- **Senior and mid level professional services managers:** Director of Research and Enterprise/Knowledge Transfer; Director of Graduate Employment and/or Careers Service; Director of Business Development.

- **Heads of academic units:** Dean of Faculty/School; Dean of PG studies.

- **Heads of Continuing Professional Development:** Director of CPD, Workforce Development, Lifelong Learning and/or Executive Education (academic or professional services roles)

- **Business liaison staff:** Higher Level Skills Intermediary/Manager; Business Relations Manager.

Within each institution at least one academic and one professional services representative was interviewed. Interviewees were identified via consultation with a senior-level contact within each HEI, as well as asking for recommendations from other interviewees. All interviews were conducted between June and October 2009 and were supplemented by information from the institution's strategic plan; teaching, learning and research strategies; and website. Data from each institution was written up as an individual case study prior to cross-institutional analysis. Due to confidentiality agreements with participants and their institutions it is not possible to disclose identities within this report.

This report is structured into seven chapters as follows:

1. Introduction
2. Strategic purpose of EE
3. Supporting and resourcing EE
4. Structures for teaching and learning
5. Communicating and embedding an EE approach
6. Changing contexts for EE
7. Conclusions

12. The pre/post 1992 distinction is commonly used to distinguish between traditional universities and ex-polytechnics that were awarded university status in 1992, along with university colleges and other institutions that have gained university status subsequently. The latter institutions have tended to have a more vocational orientation than traditional universities and are more heavily involved in the mass delivery of HE programmes.

13. Each of these groups represents the interests of a group of universities with a broadly similar mission. Russell group universities are generally traditional institutions with a strong research focus; 1994 group universities are generally smaller, research-focussed institutions; and Million + represents the interests of many post-1992 universities with a predominantly teaching focus.

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Figure 1 below maps out the main areas that will be covered within this report. It is portrayed as a building in which the bedrock/foundations are the issues discussed in chapter 2, the supporting columns are those explored in chapters 3, 4 and 5, and the roof (and future direction) is illustrated by those factors in chapter 6. The connecting arrows from the top to the bottom indicate that none of these features are static and continue to be modified and reviewed in relation to the changing context and marketplace.

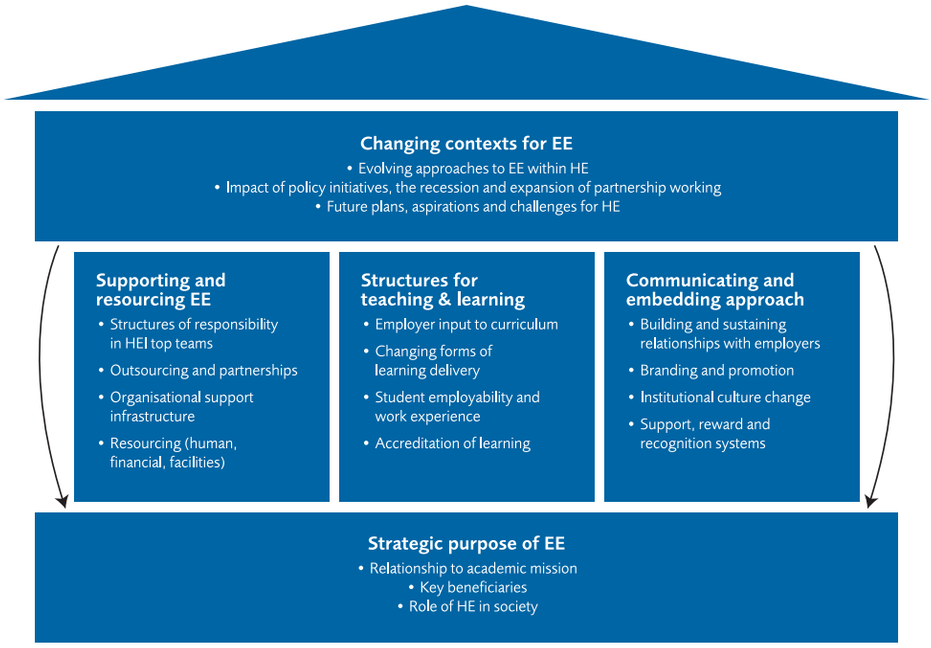

Figure 1 – Illustration of report content and structure

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2. Strategic Purpose of Employer Engagement

The first cluster of findings from this research relate to the overall strategic positioning of HEIs vis-à-vis employer engagement. Key themes are summarised below:

- **EE is core to academic mission:** it is not regarded as an 'add on' activity or a 'third leg' but as a key part of teaching and research. This applies in all types of institutions.
- **Students are the key beneficiaries:** despite all of the encouragement by government to shift universities to focus on employers needs, students are still regarded as the key customer/client (be they in employment or not). In particular there is a focus on 'employability' and preparing learners for their working lives.
- **EE supports research:** all institutions, regardless of their research profile, placed a high priority on research and regarded EE as an important means for enhancing research profile and impact. The research interests of academics and institutions were seen as integral to EE and the contribution that can be made by HE.
- **The social contribution of HE:** for many institutions, EE is broader than just business engagement and includes a substantial social/community dimension including public and third sectors and specialisation within specific sectors and/or occupations.

Each of these points will now be described in turn and illustrated with examples.

2.1 Employer engagement is core to academic mission

All institutions in our sample described a relatively holistic understanding of EE as an integral part of the academic missions of teaching and research rather than an 'add on' activity. A DVC at one university, for example said:

> *"Employer engagement is key to what we do." (DVC for Research, post-1992 university, case 6)*

The Director of Enterprise at another said:

> *"Employer Engagement is a way of working with people and a way of approaching Teaching & Learning and it is not a separate stand alone activity in its own right - it is part of Teaching & Learning and it is part of Research. You need Employer Engagement in all those elements." (DVC for Research, post-1992 university, case 4)*

Whilst both of these quotes come from institutions with strong reputations for being employer focussed, the same message was also commonly stated within more research-intensive institutions. This is an interesting observation given that much UK government policy presents EE as a relatively new strand of activity that offers an additional income stream to institutions which see themselves as more vocationally orientated. In effect, our findings demonstrate a broader understanding of EE than the relatively narrow association with workforce development portrayed in much policy documentation[14], pointing more towards the importance of knowledge exchange in embedding academic teaching and research.

> *"Knowledge exchange is the glue that fits research, teaching, and external offerings together." (Deputy Head of Business and Community, post-1992 university, case 10)*

In describing the purpose of EE within their institutions our research participants invariably pointed towards its contribution to research and teaching activities and regarded it as a core aspect of their work[15]. Frequent reference was made to their institutional history and the vocational origins of many HEIs which placed engagement with employers as a core part of their strategy and culture.

Although all institutions in our sample engaged to some extent in CPD and WFD only a minority saw this as a key priority in itself as indicated in the following quote from a PVC at a research-intensive Russell Group university.

> *"CPD is not a priority here. The priority for academic staff is to be successful and internationally recognised researchers and turning out good graduates at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. CPD is not one of our top things. We are not seeking to expand it enormously, although we would let it grow organically." (PVC for Education, pre-1992 university, case 5)*

14. E.g. Leitch (2006)
15. Although it should be noted that the level of involvement in EE varies between staff and disciplines.

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Where CPD and/or WFD were substantial and growing areas of provision institutions frequently organised these as separate activities from mainstream teaching and research. One institution had even gone as far as establishing an independent training company to manage its CPD offering and to act as a first port of call for employers looking for short courses and consultancy. The director of this centre commented that such an arrangement was very helpful in tailoring courses to meet the needs of employers rather than simply *'trying to flog'* existing provision. Another institution had segmented offerings by faculty and devolved them to this level for delivery.

Overall, therefore, our findings indicated that all institutions, including those that might be regarded as research-intensive, consider EE as an essential and natural part of what they do as HEIs - albeit that we noted variations in the degree to which CPD and WFD were considered as priorities.

2.2 Students are the key beneficiaries

Despite all of the encouragement by government for universities to shift their focus to employer needs, our interviews indicate that learners are still regarded as the key customer/client for HE (whether or not they are already in employment) and EE is regarded as a means for enhancing the student experience. This seemed to apply both in traditional and new universities.

To this extent, much of the focus on EE was on the 'employability' and work experience of graduates rather than up- or re-skilling people already in work. An emphasis was placed on producing well-rounded graduates who were prepared for the world of work, rather than meeting the specific needs and/or expectations of a single employer, as illustrated in the following quote:

> *"Employer engagement at [this university] is not about being 'employer driven' it's about educating people." (DVC for Research, post-1992 university, case 4)*

The focus within each institution, including those that might be regarded as more vocationally-orientated, was on skills for life – a long-term commitment to their personal and professional development.

> *"Our primary customers are the students and it's their individual life trajectory that matters more, rather than making them suit one particular employer at the end of their studies, the current approach seems very short termist." (Director of Business Development, pre-1992 university, case 8)*

The student experience and an ability to find gainful employment after graduation were regarded as key criteria in attracting students and were equally significant for vocational and more traditional academic subjects. As universities seek to increase income from fees for both home and international students they need to provide evidence of employment prospects and also to build relationships with potential graduate recruiters based on an understanding of their capacity to produce 'work-ready' graduates.

An additional area in which students could benefit from a focus on EE, highlighted in a number of institutions, was being taught by academics with industrial/professional experience as illustrated in the following quote from the Dean of Engineering at a research-intensive university.

> *"It is important for students to have their eyes opened to industry. They need to understand what the professional aspect of their training is about... You need industrial experience – to get out there – to teach engineering well in HE." (Dean of Engineering, pre-1992 university, case 5)*

Employer experience was seen as important in many areas for academics and contributed positively to the learning experience for students through added interest, relevance and opportunities. Furthermore, many universities in our sample involved employers more directly in teaching through input to course content and curricula, guest lectures and/or tutorials, etc.

2.3 Employer engagement supports research

Within all universities in our sample there was also evidence that EE could contribute in a positive way to their research mission. Each institution, including those that might not be considered as 'research-intensive', highlighted the significance of research to their role and identity as universities as illustrated below.

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"We need research or we are not a university. Our research needs to be both high quality and applied. Our USP in a number of subject areas is solid academic research plus our commercially facing position. This gives us a competitive edge over other training providers... If we are not doing leading edge work we lose our brand." (Dean of Business School, post-1992 university, case 4)

Even the university college in our sample stressed the importance of research and the need to be seen as a *"high quality, teaching led, research informed institution"*. In this case, whilst the institution attracts little in the way of discrete funding for research it still places a high importance on applied research that informs teaching practice and/or addresses the interests of employer partners.

In both pre and post-1992 institutions EE was seen to enhance research through the access it provides to interesting issues and organisations, the ability to attract research funding, and for the dissemination of research findings and demonstration of research 'impact'.

The Director of Research and Knowledge Transfer at one such institution stated that *"academics are the key customers"*, implying that the EE infrastructure should be designed to support the work of academics (in both teaching and research) rather than to force them to adapt what they do to meet the demands of employers per-se. He also pointed to a potential future challenge in that the emphasis on 'research impact' now demanded by the major UK Research Councils would require academics to engage with employers in ways that they had not previously been asked to and in a fashion that may not directly meet the needs of either academics or employers (thereby potentially undermining positive progress in other areas).

The opportunity of gaining research opportunities (whether applied or more conceptual) was also seen as a major motivating factor for academic staff and hence an important factor in how HEIs communicate their strategy internally (see section 5.4 for further details).

"The research driver is important for them in taking on executive education teaching – they want to work with employers of interest to their research." (Deputy Dean of Business School, pre-1992 university, case 5)

2.4 The social and community contribution of HE

Whilst the policy literature often frames EE in terms of engaging with businesses in order to enhance the economic competitiveness of the UK the responses from our sample institutions indicated a clear commitment to a wider social/community engagement. Although this was especially true of institutions with strong links to a particular sector/occupation and/or city/region it could be seen to some regard within all of case HEIs. The decision about whether or not to work with a particular organisation, therefore, was informed by a variety of issues including the ability for the relationship to grow, the ability to develop a new area of research/teaching expertise, and the ability to influence policy (as well as financial viability).

A number of institutions expressed concern about an excessive emphasis on business engagement as a commercial activity if this is done at the expense of the core academic and social mission, as indicated in the following quotes, both from research-intensive pre-1992 universities.

"We would be concerned if institutions like ours were forced down the road of too much employer engagement at the expense of our core academic mission. Our real contribution is innovation and anything which impairs our ability to innovate I would see as bad." (PVC for Education, pre-1992 university, case 5)

"[Our university's] civic history makes a difference... It wishes to be business like but doesn't wish to see itself as a business. A lot of universities have forgotten that they're universities - [our university] remembers what it is to be a university. We need money to pay the bills ... but we exist as an educational institution first, rather than as a business that is making money." (Director of Business Development, pre-1992 university, case 8)

Even some of the more vocationally-orientated institutions stressed that many of their employer links were with public-sector and/or third sector organisations and so the term 'employer' is more appropriate than 'business'.. This was especially true of those involved in teacher training and the development of medical professionals although some had also developed areas of

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strategic importance with councils, social care and other educational providers such as further education (FE) colleges (see section 3.1.4 for more discussion on special cases).

A number of institutions stressed a moral commitment to engage with a wide range of employers and the ethical challenges of tailoring provision for just those who could afford it. A Business Relations Manager at one institution said, for instance, in relation to the current economic downturn:

> *"There's a moral need to be involved and to find other ways of working together where people are struggling financially... we need to be regarded as loyal and decent." (Business Relations Manager, pre-1992 university, case 3)*

At another institution the Director of Business Development proposed:

> *"Engagement is perceived broadly: the voluntary sector matters a great deal, the public sector matters a great deal, the private sector matters a great deal, they're all part of society, we need to engage effectively with all of them." (Director of Business Development, pre-1992 university, case 8)*

Rather than tailoring provision to the requirements of a single organisation, therefore, many institutions showed a preference for developing links with a particular 'cluster', 'sector' or 'occupation' as it enabled them to contribute to developing capacity more broadly (see section 4.1 for further discussion of this point).

A key concern, however, was the extent to which institutions felt able to engage with small and medium enterprises (SMEs) which, whilst highly prevalent in some regions, remained challenging to engage in a resource-efficient manner. In a number of instances institutions dealt with these tensions by regarding such work as 'corporate social responsibility' (CSR) rather than executive education, and did not expect it to be fully self-financing.

2.5 Summary

In this chapter we have illustrated that:

- EE is regarded as a core aspect of the academic mission within all types of HEI and not as a 'third leg' activity.
- It is regarded as contributing positively to all forms of education, not just CPD and WFD, and as forming a key pillar of the student experience and employability.
- It is also regarded as integral to research, offering access to research sites, funding, dissemination and impact.
- HEIs regard their contribution to EE as having a wider social impact than simply 'business engagement' and meeting the skills needs of specific employers.
- Together these points constitute the strategic foundation for the majority of HE-EE activity.

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3. Supporting and Resourcing Employer Engagement

As HEIs implement their evolving strategies for employer engagement there is a set of structural, process and resourcing issues (as illustrated in Figure 1) which senior HE leaders find they need to address. The factors covered in this chapter are what we might consider as the support infrastructure for the expansion of EE activities into the core ways in which HEIs operate. A second set of factors related to the teaching and learning infrastructure is described in Chapter 4, and a third set of factors, associated with cultural issues and encouraging academics to work more enthusiastically with employers, is covered in Chapter 5. Each of these 'hard' and 'soft' adaptations to EE are vitally important and need to be seen as acting together to support institutional strategy.

So starting then with the 'hard wiring' of EE into HE, this chapter looks at:

- **Organisational structures of responsibility and support for EE:** covering where EE sits in the top team, different forms of organisational partnership, and how the internal support functions of HEIs are adapting to take on the expanding challenges of EE.
- **Resourcing EE activities:** including staffing, finance and financial systems and physical assets (campus locations and buildings).

Throughout this chapter we need to bear in mind that HEIs are pursuing different strategies and so have different challenges and priorities among this range of factors. Even where they identify a similar challenge, they may be pursuing different solutions. Examples will be given of some of these specific solutions as they may be useful to others considering the same challenges. In many cases the solutions are still fluid and emerging, as HEIs work out how to embody in their structures and processes the quite subtle weaving in of EE to their existing ways of working.

3.1 Organisational structures of responsibility and support

EE requires both some changes to existing HE activities and some new or much increased activities, especially in managing relationships with employers and the delivery of WFD/WBL where this will be of significant volume. This changing activity raises four issues about organisational structure:

- where EE sits in the responsibilities of leadership teams in HEIs,
- forms of organisational partnership to deliver the EE strategy,
- functions inside the organisation to support EE,
- the special positioning of some academic faculties or departments such as business and medicine.

If EE is really a thread running through the activities of HEIs, then it can't be put in one separate place. And yet new things do not happen with energy unless some parts of the organisation can focus on them. So we see in organisational structures, something of a struggle between embedding EE in every part of the institution and creating new organisational structures to give it focus and momentum.

3.1.1 Positioning EE in the top leadership team

The HEIs in this study have a CEO (VC, Principal or Rector) and a top team with functional responsibilities for aspects of the institution (usually PVCs or equivalent). There may also be posts at top level for heads of major faculties.

Some of the case institutions have created a PVC for Employer Engagement, but this is not necessarily the dominant model. Several have deliberately fluid roles in the top team, sometimes without any particular job title indicating a specific functional focus, although it is common to have a PVC with a strong responsibility for Teaching and Learning (often labelled 'Education') and another with responsibility for Research.

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Responsibility for 'enterprise' often sits with research, as does innovation and consultancy in those HEIs operating a significant high level consultancy activity. So a lot of the research-facing EE agenda, often seen in terms of Knowledge Transfer, would naturally sit here.

The design and delivery of new kinds of learning, including WBL, CPD and learning delivered through FE partners, naturally sits with the teaching and learning remit. Issues of accreditation also sit here.

There is often a third PVC but this remit varies considerably, often depending on the emphasis within EE or other commercial activities of the institution.

Here are some examples from our study of how top teams take on the EE remit:

1. PVC for the Student Experience also covering Engagement, in addition to the PVC for Teaching and Learning. In this case a third PVC, for Research and Innovation, still held a number of aspects of EE within their portfolio.
2. PVC for Research, Enterprise and Knowledge Exchange covering CPD activity here rather than under Teaching and Learning. In this case a Head of CPD reports to this role.
3. A large team responsible for all aspects of EE reporting into a PVC for Research and Enterprise.
4. A top team post for Commercial Development, separate from research and covering many aspects of enterprise, including spin-out companies etc. This post does not explicitly cover promotion of CPD for employers, although the teams under this post would support academics agreeing contracts for CPD work.
5. A top team post for Employer Engagement, replacing a Business Development post at the next tier down which used to report into Teaching and Learning.

It is important to note that the juggling of EE between research, learning or a third cluster of accountabilities does not align in terms of pre- or post- 92 or even the degree of research intensity within institutions. The third example above is in a post-92 institution with an extremely strong commitment to WFD and EE embedded in teaching and learning. The fourth is a research-intensive pre-92 institution, but one with a strongly commercial ethos.

There are obviously tensions in how to position EE at top team level, and some institutions had experienced a degree of conflict in the top team over this issue. Some chose to go with a PVC with the title of Employer Engagement to send a strong internal and external signal of its importance. Others preferred to segment the EE cluster between research and teaching in order to promote close working between PVCs on this agenda.

Perhaps the acid test here is not the way the jobs are allocated at top level, but the cohesiveness of the top team over its understanding of what EE really means for the institution and how activities can be linked together. In some cases the VC (or equivalent) had taken a very personal interest in engaging employers – and the outside world generally – in the affairs of the institution. In these cases, the top team seemed far more united in its strategy and approach and willing to work more flexibly on this complex agenda.

3.1.2 Outsourcing and partnerships

Many facets of EE have to sit within the HEI to achieve the desired level of integration with the teaching and research missions. Institutions involved in fairly limited amounts of WFD naturally accommodate this, at least initially, within their own organisation.

As the earlier phases of this research have shown[16], HEIs have worked with a wide range of partner organisations in developing their EE approaches. They will continue no doubt to work with external agencies, sectoral and professional bodies and other intermediary organisations to help their work move forward. However the strongest permanent partnership structures were those with FE and private sector training providers.

FE colleges were particularly prominent partners for foundation degrees (FDs) whilst private providers offered additional capacity to respond to tailored and demand-led CPD and WBL. These partnerships are discussed further in section 6.4.

16. See, for example, Bolden, Connor, Duquemin, Hirsh and Petrov (2009).

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3.1.3 Functions inside the organisation to support EE

The increasing focus on EE within UK HE is leading to changes in the support functions in HEIs. There is a range of activities which may help academics to work effectively with employers, and HEIs typically look to non-academic staff and to the creation or adaptation of a range of support functions to do this.

The nature and organisation of institutional support for EE

The supporting activities involved in EE are very diverse and often include:

- General aspects of the HEI operating commercially with employing organisations as external customers e.g. marketing the institution and its full range of services to employers, making or maintaining contacts with employers, being the first port of call for enquiries, support for innovation, patents, research contracts etc.
- Supporting the less commercial aspects of EE such as facilitating discussions about the content of open degrees, finding employers who will offer work experience to students, facilitating the recruitment activities of employers and the career development of students etc
- Support more specifically for the delivery of WFD/CPD and WBL, including the design and delivery, accreditation and administration of CPD courses etc.
- Supporting employability and the careers education of students as well as working with employers who come to the HEI for recruits. Alumni relations are often a feature of this area of EE support.

These activities, and the job roles which go with them, are still evolving. Organisations do not necessarily agree on the nature of the support activities which best help academics deliver. For example, several cases were experimenting with 'business development' roles, especially in the context of increasing their WFD activity.

- Some of those interviewed said there was a need for business development roles to act as 'translators' to explore and articulate what business wants into terms which academics can understand.

> *"The key thing is to get the translators [Business Account Managers] in place. It's about long-term relationships rather than short-term returns. These people need to be able to access appropriate resources and influence people at a sufficiently senior level to get things done. Need to be able to translate what an academic institution can do for businesses and vice versa." (Business Relations Manager, pre-1992 university, case 3)*

- Another organisation strongly rejected the idea of an externally focused 'translation' role and saw the business development role in terms of a more internal focus in terms of supporting academics to engage directly as indicated in the following quote:

> *"The need is for academics to engage directly. They need support for that engagement rather than a translator. All the translator does is maintain a distance between the two organisations. That doesn't bring about an understanding in the academic community or the business community of the true academic drivers. (Director of Business Development, pre-1992 university, case 8)*

- In this institution, once a CPD project has been set up it is managed by the academic unit concerned with its delivery. A separate teaching quality unit is in place to advise and support on learning-related matters.
- Another HEI uses the concept of a 'two stage conversation' with employers. The business development team (working in a Research, Business and Innovation unit) would have the first conversation with an employer about their interests or needs. The second conversation would bring in appropriate academic staff, so the business-academic relationship is forged quite early on.

These business development functions seem to be taking over the role of external 'brokers' in WFD, which have been a feature of some of the pilot initiatives in WFD. Although external brokers were sometimes useful in catalysing new initiatives, HEIs seem to find it more effective to bring this skill set in-house in order to integrate EE with the rest of the institution. These trends are explored further in Chapter 6.

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In institutions with a high volume of work placements or sandwich students it is not uncommon to find dedicated resources in departments or faculties to manage this activity. In one institution these came together in a central Placement Tutors Forum under the PVC for Teaching and Learning.

New opportunities for careers services

Compared with the emergent business development and CPD functions in HE, the careers services are a long-standing and well-established feature of the HE landscape. Many careers services have for some time focussed on employability skills and working closely with academic staff to deliver careers education as part of the curriculum for UG and PG students. This has brought them closer to the core teaching and learning activities. They are also well used to having relationships with employers through their support of student recruitment activities, which positions them close to the enterprise activities of HEIs. One careers service interviewed has over 200 new contacts with employing organisations each month.

As the EE agenda has grown, some careers services have taken the opportunity to restructure themselves, extend their remit and connect themselves more closely with other functions. They can provide an important gateway into an HEI for employers who would not think of contacting a Business Development or CPD unit and can help recruiters become interested in research or WFD. They are often also involved in finding employers interested in work placements and helping the institution capitalise on its relationships with alumni.

This study suggests that EE is changing the context in which HE careers services operate. Those looking to the future are repositioning themselves as more central to the overall mission of the institution. Others risk being sidelined by business development functions which may divert the strong relationships with employers which careers services need to maintain. The following quote, from a PVC for Teaching and Learning at a pre-1992 research-intensive university positions the Careers Service as an integral part of EE:

> *"Our careers service has good relationships with employers. We have a very good careers service who do a lot in terms of enterprise and entrepreneurial skill development for our masters and undergraduate students and research students. They are very involved in teaching and learning in that way. They help with placements. So we see them as very much part of our employer engagement." (PVC for Teaching and Learning, pre-1992 university, case 8)*

Relationship management and data management

Two issues of current interest in the institutions we studied were relationship management and data management. With regards to the first of these, some institutions were putting in place formal and centralised roles or responsibilities for 'relationship management' with specific employers, whilst others actively decided not to go down this route. Models included:

- Relationship Managers within a centralised support service and also within schools/ departments
- Central Business Account Managers for strategically important organisations
- Strategic Relationship Managers for a limited number of extremely important organisational partners, reporting directly to PVC level
- The exploration but rejection of central relationship management, largely because of a sense that it would add little value to employers.

Again the tension is between creating new corporate functions or leaving the responsibility for EE to academic departments where it may be evolving quite naturally anyway.

One clear weakness of the evolving models is that institutions may not know which employers they are working with or what they are doing with them. Several institutions, including some of those seen as furthest down the EE road, were actively reviewing their data systems. Databases of employer contacts and employer-related activity were an obvious target for improvement. But increased WBL also raises challenges about student data systems for these new populations. In all instances due to the size

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and complexity of the HEI and the organisations with which it engages, keeping track of activity with specific employers proves challenging.

Centralised and decentralised support structures

As well as unpicking the nature of support and how to group these activities into functions or teams, HEIs have been experimenting with what to do centrally and what to position within academic departments or faculties. Centralisation gives critical mass, less duplication and the possibility of developing more specialist expertise. But it can move links with employers too far away from academic staff and the normal structures for organising teaching and research. Several cases also showed that major employers really appreciate the links they have with academics in departments and do not want more centralised structures to cut across these relationships.

Examples of how HEIs are trying to get the best of both centralised and decentralised models include:

- A central business development team with staff who have specific subject expertise. They 'hot' desk' in a faculty relevant to their subject area
- Business Development Managers located in faculties but line managed from a central enterprise support unit
- A centralised capability in the form of a wholly owned subsidiary dealing with all contractual and legal matters in all commercial relationships, whether research, consulting or CPD (discussions about the content of such activities remain firmly with academics).
- A central team located with research, innovation and enterprise, but also a pivotal role for the Business School in engaging with employers
- Pulling together a number of central functions into one integrated 'business partnership' facility, all in the same building. This covers a range of enterprise activities but also WFD advice for employers, a private sector training company, and the careers and recruitment service, also dealing with student placements. This one-stop shop for employers is complemented by a full time business development consultant in each faculty reporting to the central business partnership team.

If there is a discernable trend, it is to centralise slightly more, but in ways which are quite 'light touch' and do not cut across the direct relationships between academics and business-people. Some HEIs feel they have rather over-centralised and so are re-balancing activity back to faculties or departments, as illustrated in the following quote.

> *"The way we were approaching WBL previously was not sustainable. You have to increase the capability in the faculties. You have to develop the academic staff if you are going to do this, and the only way to do it is to run this activity from the faculties and get the complete buy-in of the faculties. So we took out all teaching and learning [in WBL] to the faculties where they will own it and then it will lock in with their quality assurance procedures… then in the centre it is purely the oversight of the standards and assurance." (Director of Enterprise, post-1992 university, case 6)*

Joined up support

A strong over-arching theme, whatever the structures chosen, is the need for support which joins up the capability of the organisation across supporting functions and academic expertise.

> *"Infrastructure is about making sure that when we identify an opportunity we can make it happen. It is about pulling in various services across the university, including Finance for pricing, library and IT for developing learning resources, together with faculties and it is about quality assurance mechanisms, which are rigorous and robust and yet flexible." (Director of Enterprise, post-1992 university, case 6)*

> *"What we try to do is ensure that silos don't get in the way. We aim to bring together different parts of the university system to tackle an opportunity rather than view it in one box. The interesting stuff is often whatever crosses different spheres of activity." (Director of Business Development, pre-1992 university, case 8)*

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These points relate closely to those expressed in Chapter 2 about the alignment of organisational missions and strategy, and Chapter 5 about the engagement of academic and professional services staff in bringing about cultural change in HE.

3.1.4 The special positioning of business and medical schools

In looking at the organisation of EE within HEIs, we should note that some subject areas have a different relationship with employers than others. Often this is a matter of degree – for example engineering departments were naturally much more intensively involved with employers than humanities. But a couple of subject areas were so different that they often influenced their institutional strategies and/or were regarded as 'special cases' by their institutions, with their own structures and processes.

Business schools have a strong need to work with employers for research reasons and employers purchase management and leadership development at a range of levels; consequently they tend to have a naturally higher intensity of WFD and EE activity than other faculties. Some institutions have built on this to locate the centre of gravity of their EE effort in their business school and use it as a kind of spearhead for the whole institution.

- In at least one case, the business development and CPD functions were located in the business school and serviced the university from there, pulling in other academics when needed. In some others CPD units seemed to be gravitating towards the business school, being too small to function well as a centralised free-standing team
- In another example, a directorate for Lifelong Learning, which used to lead on CPD, had recently merged with the Business School to form a new Faculty of Business, Enterprise and Lifelong learning.
- In another case, the Dean of the Business School carried a senior remit for WFD across the university, working closely with the PVCs for teaching and learning and for enterprise.
- In other cases, the business school operated in parallel with institutional level support services for EE, but having more of its own marketing and CPD support capacity within its own department.

Medical schools (and university schools for some other health professions, such as nursing) have a special relationship with the National Health Service (NHS) as more or less the monopoly employer. Medical education is already work-based and forms an existing organisational bridge between universities and the NHS. Medical schools and postgraduate medical schools therefore form much more integrated relationships with HE. NHS Trusts are also now placing very large contracts for CPD for doctors and other health professionals. Universities with medical schools or with strong subject expertise in health and social care are bidding for such work, often successfully. Like business schools, these departments can become a focus for certain types of EE activity which may not be replicated across the HEI as a whole.

Other faculties/programmes with a close relationship to particular employers include teacher training for schools, theological training for the diocese, and specialist professions such as engineering. In each case, there may well be long-established, deep relationships with employers, although these may not be immediately considered as examples of 'employer engagement', which is often considered to mean WFD for commercial organisations.

3.2 Resourcing Employer Engagement

Alongside structures for responsibility and support, it is essential that HEIs implement effective and sustainable resource structures to manage the allocation of staff and finances to EE activities.

3.2.1 Staff

For the majority of the case organisations, WFD/CPD outside of existing vocational degree teaching was a small proportion of overall academic workload and institutional revenue. For these HEIs, the most visible staffing implications of EE were the evolving support functions discussed in section 3.1.3. In some of the case institutions these totalled well over a hundred jobs – probably more including additional administrative support at departmental level.

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When it comes to academic input to deliver this teaching, most of the institutions in this study were accommodating it within their existing academic staff. This leads to the need for some mechanisms for agreeing extra teaching workload, including the workload to develop new courses. This was mostly a matter of building it into their workload allocation system and/or additional payment of some kind. There are many tricky issues however about how such systems should trade time and money, and where any money should go to.

The mechanics were not always straightforward because of the unpredictable nature of employer-related work. HEIs are used to planning workload in advance on the basis of known commitment for the year ahead. We return to the issue of incentives for academics in Chapter 5.

Some institutions wanted to make it clear that some of their academics may do a lot of CPD teaching and others much less. Systems need to be able to cope with this diversity, as indeed with the diverse patterns of research activity. One highlighted that this diversity of academic roles has always been a feature of HE and needs to be recognised in implementing EE strategies. If people do more of one thing (e.g. CPD), they usually need to do less of something else.

> *"Not everyone has to do everything. It's about teams and initiatives not every person doing the same thing."*
> *(Dean of Business School, post-1992 university, case 4)*

If the demand for teaching input grows beyond a certain point, institutions look to a second strategy – employing additional teaching staff. These include affiliated tutors or consultants of various kinds. Business schools, for example, have had such affiliates or associates for many years, not just to give increased and more flexible capacity for executive education, but to bring different skill sets to such teaching. Institutions are also experimenting with the introduction of new roles (such as Teaching Fellow) to expand the range of expertise, and motivations, of their own academic staff. Such arrangements were in place in several of the case organisations and one might imagine they may spread to other subject areas in time. If additional teaching or WBL support becomes a very significant part of the institution's overall product mix, then it seems outsourcing is the commonest strategy, as discussed in section 3.1.2.

It is important to recognise that the staffing issues arising out of EE strategies are not just about the numbers of people involved but also about their skill mix and work interests. Both academics working with employers and the varied support functions involved in EE need new skills. In particular they need to bridge between a very good understanding of what the institution has to offer and how that might be delivered with a really good understanding of a business or sector's needs and the ability to talk with employers about their needs. EE can also require academics to adapt to new delivery and assessment approaches (e.g. workplace assessment and accreditation, distance learning, etc.) and the requirements of different kinds of learners (e.g. busy senior executives, people who have not studied in HE for a long time if at all, etc.). So EE strategies need to link with the workforce development plans for the HEI as a whole.

Whilst these issues may appear most significant for academic staff they also have major implications for administrative/support staff as mature, part-time learners have a different set of expectations and requirements from full-time, young students. The EE agenda is driving a greater need for 'professionalization' across all forms of activity.

3.2.2 Money

Although staff resourcing issues often emerged naturally in interviews, issues about finance were somewhat hidden – but often even more challenging.

Is EE financially viable?

As we have seen, EE often leads to new or increased activities and to increased costs. The fundamental strategic challenge here is to make sure that EE strategies are financially viable.

In the short term, several of the case organisations had received very significant amounts of additional public funding to develop their EE capabilities. Some of this has been spent on developing particular programmes, some on interim support roles and some on change management itself (e.g. ways of involving staff in EE strategy, building partnerships with FE). Some funding has also gone to improving physical infrastructure (as in the section below). Others used pump-prime funding to bid for major external

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funding or to test demand with employers in a range of sectors (see Chapter 6 for further details).

At least one case had made a conscious decision not to go for this kind of pump-priming money but to pursue a more evolutionary development of EE activities which would be self-funding as they went along.

Several cases were keen to point out that financial viability does not mean that every EE activity has to turn in a profit. The institutions for whom EE was rooted in a strong sense of civic or community mission often used some activities to cross-subsidise others. For example one had recently held free workshops for small firms on how to survive the recession and another was using a voucher system to give small firms an amount of free university input.

This study was conducted at a time of private sector recession and the expectation of public sector cuts which offered a timely reminder that EE in HE, as an overall set of activities, has to pay for itself in the long term (see section 6.3). Certainly the case organisations did not think is was possible for either established forms of teaching or research funding to subsidise the provision of WFD to any significant degree. This financial reality – as well as views about their missions – had led some cases to decide that large scale WFD outside existing patterns of teaching was not the way forward for them.

HE finance systems

Many of the interviews touched on the inappropriate nature of existing HE financial systems and procedures for more entrepreneurial activities. The issues included:

- A financial planning cycle which does not allow for activities emerging during a year
- Arbitrary estimates and addition of 'overhead' costs which mean few universities really know the true costs of conducting projects for employers. This also leads to a confusion between costing and pricing. Several HEIs wished to take more commercial decisions about pricing, based on how much the institution wishes to do the piece of work as well as being informed by a good estimate of its cost.

The following quote indicates a degree of flexibility in how HEIs cost their provision to employers.

> *"Decisions are based on 'do we want to do it?' and 'does it add up financially?' Costs need to be credible for the customer and the provider." (Principal, University College, case 7)*

Putting money behind consciously determined priorities

How resources are managed is an aspect of culture as well as of mechanics. In seeking to balance EE with other priorities, several cases were using explicit systems to allocate money between activities on a competitive basis. This was one way in which the cultural changes examined in Chapter 5 were linking with financial decisions. More visible priority-setting is a more commercial way of running an organisation and also can emphasise the need for ideas to come from 'bottom up' as well as 'top down'.

- One institution allocated development funding for CPD activities to the CPD unit. Staff wishing to develop new offerings have to put up a business case for development funding.
- Another had a 'bottom up' competition for any ideas from academics for employer engagement. A committee chaired by a PVC decided on how the funds would be allocated.

A number of universities in our example expressed an aspiration to become more 'business like' in their approach both to students and employers. Whilst this change is partly informed by EE priorities, it has also been significantly affected by the introduction of student fees which has arguably made the traditional student population more discerning customers[17].

17. These issues become yet more important as universities consider the possibility of the cap on fees for home students being raised and the increasingly competitive environment for the recruitment of international students.

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3.2.3 Physical resources

If HE is a sector reaching out to employers and communities, this has implications for buildings, campuses and other resources (e.g. IT facilities and libraries). This study shows that EE strategies often lead to consideration of:

- **The quality of buildings and teaching facilities:** A high quality brand for HE leads to expectations of high quality facilities. Several case organisations had been investing very significantly in the quality of their buildings and campuses, especially those buildings likely to be seen by employers / used by their employees.

- **Their image as innovative:** Several HEIs have invested in innovation centres (often housing business start-ups) and/or sophisticated, interactive learning and development facilities. Sometimes professional facilitation services were offered to those hiring such facilities. One institution was actively involved in the development of a new Science Park on the outskirts of the city. This and its innovation centre were seen as key portals for engagement with business. Another HEI hosted a local authority's internal L&D centre on its campus.

- **Their physical location:** In order to be attractive to employers and working people city centre locations were seen to be an advantage. For several, partnerships with FE colleges were partly driven by a desire to have a physical presence in more localities. This was especially an issue for universities seeking a wider geographic presence.

- **The university or college campus as a valuable public space:** One institution, for example, wanted its campus to be a 'place' where employers would be happy to come for a range of services. This influenced holding free events for employers on campus and housing several aspects of business-related advice in university buildings. The strategy was that employers who have got used to visiting the campus for a range of events or services will be more likely to visit when thinking about research or consultancy or commissioning some workforce training. Another brought high profile speakers to business events on campus to attract employers to visit.

3.3 Summary

In this chapter we have argued that HEIs are finding a need to adjust their organisational structures, processes and resources to support EE effectively. Key issues include:

- The need for EE to be promoted as a priority from the very top of the institution yet integrated across a range of roles and functions to ensure wide scale engagement, endorsement and support.

- The need for a variety of centralised and decentralised support functions to absorb the increased administrative workload that EE initiatives tend to generate, as well as building and supporting relationships with employers, assessing employer needs and tailoring solutions to meet their requirements. This may involve a rationalisation and/or repositioning of existing structures for teaching, research and employer liaison – yet should, in no way, seek to replace personal relationships between academics and employers that remain key to successful collaboration.

- The development of strategic partnerships with other learning providers (such as FE and private trainers) to help meet changing demands for volume and forms of delivery for different client groups.

- The implementation of planning, staffing and financial systems that are sufficiently flexible to respond to changing and unpredictable demand from employers. HEIs may need to become more 'business like' in how they cost and resource EE activity in order to be considered competitive and to ensure the long-term sustainability and viability of initiatives.

- Optimising the benefits of existing institutional assets, such as their campus, reputation, and networks of contacts. Recognition should also be given to the differing nature of EE between disciplines (Business and Medical schools being somewhat 'special cases') and building on areas of existing strength and reputation.

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4. Structures for Teaching and Learning

In this chapter we will consider a second set of structural issues relating to EE in HE - those concerned with how teaching and learning is designed and delivered. Issues here include the involvement of employers in curriculum design, trends in learning delivery methods in HE, structures to support the delivery of employability skills and work experience, and approaches to accreditation.

Just as the design of HEIs as organisations needs to accommodate the EE agenda, so the structures and processes by which HE organises its teaching and learning are also developing to meet more diverse kinds of educational provision.

We need to be very clear here that EE is much wider than just WFD or WBL. Many HEIs with extremely strong EE are not choosing to enter the WFD market in a big way. Others are offering WFD but only in certain subjects where the demand is strong or their expertise gives them a market advantage. Even HEIs with little WFD/CPD activity may be greatly strengthening the work experience and employability of their students and are often working closely with groups of employers on how HE can meet changing skill needs in the wider economy.

Here we will look at just a few of the ways in which EE is influencing the structures and processes of teaching and learning in HE.

4.1 Employer input into curriculum content

Most of the case organisations in this study were strongly committed to dialogue with employers (and other external stakeholders) over the broad content of their degree programmes. Several cases had a clear institutional commitment that each department will involve some employers in discussing curriculum development – one case, for example, had involved an oil company in the design of its philosophy courses.

Strategically, many HEIs wish to engage with employers on a sector basis in this way as representatives of an evolving sector or field of work – not as individual 'recruitment customers'. This ethos has to be worked through with organisations, as it may not be quite the meaning of 'demand led' that they expect.

Even when companies in the same sector come together to agree a new course they see as needed, they have different specific interests, as indicated in the following quote from a Dean of PG Studies.

> *"It's easy to talk about industry and business, but when you sit with six companies in a room, some are big some are small, they have different views, it's more complex than it sounds. We talk about 'industry' but... they're not singing from the same hymn sheet, ... For each company that's contributed to our programme each probably has things they wanted that didn't go into the final course. We aim to develop a programme that meets the needs of the sector but that never means we've met the needs of one particular company."(Dean of PG Studies, pre-1992 university, case 8)*

Structures for listening to employers exist at different levels in HEIs and take a number of forms. One university, for example had all of the following:

- 'industrial boards' for all programmes
- mechanisms for getting feedback from the high numbers of industrial placements
- a university Employability Forum, chaired by a PVC, and consisting of 20-30 employers who are strong recruiters of their own graduates. This forum had, for example, led to a request for stronger second language provision for all students, resulting in a new language centre which is used by a significant proportion of students at different language levels
- a university Council with a nearly half of its members from business and industry.

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Another institution felt that the term 'demand-led' influence was too simplistic. They saw academics in dialogue with global industry and public sector employers about the directions in which 'fields' of work were going. They were especially keen to get their own academic staff onto the councils of professional bodies to be part of these longer-term and broader debates. This institution had a high level industry board and also more detailed discussions going on at departmental level. It found, however, that this consultation process needed to mature over time:

> *"There is a growing up process about having an industrial advisory board in terms of what input industry gives and what notice the department takes of that. Some employers can be very partisan and say' we need your students to learn this, this and this'. Yes, fine, but 99% of the students don't need to know anything about that. Quite a lot of it is dialogue about what it is reasonable for universities to teach. You need to get that relationship right so that industry does not somehow think it's telling the university what to teach." (Dean of Engineering, pre-1992 university, case 5)*

In a number of cases it was felt that the notion of 'demand-led' education as something new was problematic in that it underestimates the current level of engagement between HEIs and employers and discounts large chunks of education that are already informed by employer input, as illustrated below.

> *"The academic staff are working with the company already, the company articulate the need, our academics find a way of meeting it, but it's not easily apparent that it's demand led to external observers. It puts a false hurdle in the way, it has not been seen as demand led." (Higher Skills Manager, pre-1992 university, case 8)*

Discussions with employers about the curriculum are not just about technical content but also about wider employability skills and how these are delivered (see section 4.4 below).

4.2 Trends in learning delivery in HE

The broad EE agenda is both building on and influencing the structures and nature of courses and programmes in HE.

One very visible trend is towards smaller units of teaching which can be mixed and matched in flexible ways. This has been happening in mainstream courses with the growth of modular approaches, giving credit for units of learning. This obviously positions HE to offer flexible packages of learning built on existing modules or developing new ones. Several institutions in this study were pretty much building their CPD/WFD capacity out of existing learning products in this way.

If modules are to be accredited, they need to be at an agreed HE 'level' and this can be a tricky issue and one that employers can find hard to grapple with, especially in subjects like management. Modular learning also can give the individual the opportunity to build towards a full qualification even if their employer only wants to fund part of this learning. Some HEIs are seeking to build 'pathways' or 'escalators' to help employed people progress through a range of qualifications. There are still quite a few technical issues around mixing and matching employer and HEFCE funding of modular learning at one or more 'levels' of study.

Even where HEIs were developing new short or unaccredited courses for employers, they often saw themselves as developing materials which could be used in different combinations for different customers. The term 'reusable learning objects' was sometimes used to refer to online and other teaching materials that could be repackaged and reused. In essence, HEIs are exploring how they can make maximum use of 'learning objects' such that they can recoup the relatively high costs of developing new materials, as well as becoming more rapid in responding to requests for tailored provision (through assembling a variety of different learning objects in a new configuration).

Some HEIs are consciously finding competitive advantage in learning designs which bring together modules from different disciplines. This is especially so in business studies where one university was pulling this together with sectoral expertise in health and another in engineering. This made them more attractive to employers in these sectors than generic private sector management trainers.

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This study clearly shows that the majority of WFD delivery is either a re-packaging of existing elements of degree programmes, or bespoke short courses often at the equivalent postgraduate level. Both of these can be accredited or not as discussed in section 4.4. Additional WFD has also evolved through Foundation degrees but these only affect the internal workings of HEIs in a minority of cases, as most are predominantly delivered in FE colleges.

The use of e-learning platforms and other distance learning approaches have become widespread in HE, often through the growth of part-time and 'off-shore' students. These capabilities have obvious application to work-based learners and employers are quick to see their advantages. However several cases did say it was important to keep some face-to-face learning as part of the HE student experience, especially for those who may not have taken a degree previously. One important lesson was the need to continue to consider the needs of the 'learner' when tailoring provision for employers and to offer programmes/learning opportunities that met their needs and aspirations as well as those of their employer.

Some institutions are specialising in more radical approaches to WFD and branching out in types of provision less familiar in HE:

- Individual 'learning agreements' are used in one example to allow learners and employers to tailor a programme of learning to meet the needs of the individual and their organisation. Learners obtain academic credit through the university's recognition of their learning in work-based projects. The programme can consist entirely of individual learning goals, based on current and future work activities. It can also include taught modules. Students can also receive credit for past courses or work-based activities. This very flexible approach can be used at any HE level up to Masters and in all disciplines. It is supported by the use of distance learning technology. With several hundred students now studying this way at this HEI, there is very considerable administrative and academic support required to agree all the personal agreements and support them.
- In another example, a university has expanded and developed its work-based degree programmes which grew initially within a Faculty of Lifelong Learning. Now students can take such programmes in many subjects across the university leading to awards by work-based study. These include two public sector Foundation Degrees and a postgraduate diploma in management for a public sector employer.

4.3 Employability

Perhaps the most marked aspects of EE in teaching and learning strategy in the case institutions was the strong and explicit commitment to improving 'employability' for all students. Obviously the content of courses, as discussed above, is aimed at this agenda. But so are a number of structures and processes to improve the more general employability and career skills of HE students. Interestingly, this agenda was as strong in institutions attracting well qualified entrants who found it relatively easy to gain employment, as those with more direct concerns about potential unemployment. So employability is not just about producing students who get jobs, it is about how well they have been prepared for their whole working lives, as illustrated in the following quote.

> *"Employability is a sensitive word here. Professional development is a preferred term because we would see our students as employable anyway. My agenda is to encourage the institution to think in terms of developing students who are not just going to be employable at the end of their course but are going to have really good long-term career skills to carry them beyond getting work and to be successful in their careers." (Director of Careers Service, pre-1992 university, case 5)*

Two areas of 'employability' activity were important in most of the institutional strategies: the delivery of employability skills within the curriculum and increasing work experience during study.

4.3.1 Employability skills within the curriculum

As employability becomes a familiar concept in HE, the long and complex lists of employability skills seem to have been replaced by much greater strategic clarity about which skills really matter. The two which were mentioned repeatedly were teamworking and communication. Opportunities to practice these skills are now built in to many degree courses[18].

18. A recent report from the 1994 Group (2009) refers to this as 'co-curricular' activity.

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Career development skills were also acknowledged but not so clearly articulated by institutional leaders. These skills are also not so easy to embed in the curriculum. Careers services were often very involved in working on career skills and wider employability. They collaborated with employers in a wide variety of campus activities e.g. talks about specific sectors or professions, employer-led sessions on applying for jobs and managing your career. Careers services were also often working closely with departments to embed careers teaching into their programmes.

- In one example a careers service with a wide remit takes the lead on delivering employability skills. They use a 60:30:10 approach. 60% of the careers and employability work of students is self-help but very actively supported by a specialist information resources team within the careers unit. 30% is delivered though large group teaching within the curriculum. 10% of support is through 1-1 career guidance from a dedicated team of career consultants. 30% of students attend career workshops, which cover CV writing, interviews and assessment centres, and how to market oneself.

As with so many strands of employer-related work, some institutions are trying to share their understanding internally as well as to maximise their learning from employers. The example above used a mix of external and internal fora to influence their strategic employability agenda:

- The strategic planning process and its discussion with staff help to position employer engagement and employability as part of teaching and learning
- The University Court and a range of Professional Advisory Groups and Industry Liaison Groups bring a range of external perspectives to this issue, including those of employers
- A Dean's Advisory Group meeting brings together each Dean with their Heads of School and the careers service to be a faculty level forum for discussing employability

4.3.2 Work experience

A second strategic strand of the employability agenda was much stronger commitment to giving all students some real access to work experience during their studies. This was explicit in several of the cases. The purpose of work experience was seen as improving students' skills and CVs, but also helping them in their career decision-making and general awareness of the world of work. Again this issue was not a pre-92 or post-92 one. Two institutions with the strongest commitment to this strategy were research-led, highly rated, pre-92 universities.

Interesting, these two institutions also had high proportions of overseas students and stressed the need for both cultural and practical awareness of some of their constraints with regard to the type and location of work experience which overseas students would find acceptable. There was also a growing emphasis on the value of international student placements for home/UK students.

Several institutions built opportunities for student volunteering into their placement practices, some undertaking very challenging volunteer work in developing countries.

Increasing commitment to work experience brings the major challenge of finding very large numbers of placement opportunities. Several institutions were employing 'placement officers' in faculties or departments – at an additional cost. Some institutions were giving their own students work experience within the university and others were in effect operating employment agencies, earning some revenue through hiring out students to employers in their holidays or on graduation. Some cases found that well supported mechanisms for work placements brought keen employers to the university after a few years, so they did not have to go looking for them as much as one might expect.

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4.4 Accreditation

EE is raising significant issues about accreditation in HE. These were issues people in this study did not always agree about in terms of strategic direction.

4.4.1 Differing views on the centrality of accreditation

The interviews uncovered a number of arguments about the importance of accreditation within the HE sector. Much of the WFD/CPD teaching delivered by the case organisations was not accredited. Typical examples here were short courses run for highly qualified people in employment to keep them up-to-date in their field or to introduce new ideas or techniques, or to enhance their management skills. Some institutions have found employers interested in developing ways of accrediting such activity, but often after they have been running such courses for a while – so employer interest in accreditation may come later on[19]. Some of those interviewed felt that accreditation of WFD was not generally of high interest to employers, but that HE should encourage accreditation because it might be of benefit to the learners. Others referred to government's desire for accreditation.

> *"Employers will not invest unless they see a direct impact on business performance – more important than accreditation." (PVC for Education, pre-1992 university, case 3)*
>
> *"The employer doesn't really care but the bit of paper is added value for the employee. Also not accrediting is a loss to the nation." (PVC for Research, post-1992 university, case 4)*
>
> *"It is the way the government measures success but is not driven for client need." (PVC for Teaching and Learning, post-1992 university, case 4)*

There are rather different arguments, more strongly in favour of accreditation, which come into play when referring to adults who are less well qualified. Some of the WBL strategies and the development of Foundation Degrees are more clearly aimed at this population, although again there are strong differences of view about how much employers are really interested in giving people qualifications per se. Those individuals or institutions highly committed to accreditation claim employers are looking for this as a USP (unique selling proposition) of HE. Some are pursuing accreditation in the workplace as a potential HE product in its own right and revenue stream. But the majority seem to take a far more pragmatic view of employer attitudes and are also more pragmatic about mixing accredited and non-accredited offerings.

A third set of arguments arose in the institutions with a high density of students in subjects related to the 'professions' e.g. engineering, health, law, accountancy. The issue here is not so much whether to accredit or not, but more about gaining accreditation by the professional body as well as the university or college. Several institutions make it a strategic priority to bring university and professional body accreditation closer together, whilst others explicitly offer 'professional' rather than 'academic' qualifications through strategic relationships with professional associations[20]. Again we found this strategy was not limited to a particular kind of institution – it was more a result of their degree subject mix.

4.4.2 More flexible accreditation frameworks

There was a much higher level of agreement across the case organisations about the need for accreditation frameworks which can cope with much more rapid development or change in courses and also accredit more bespoke courses, smaller chunks of learning and work-based learning.

Some of the case organisations had been in the forefront of developing such flexible approaches. One example looked like this:

- A flexible award framework has been developed which facilitates the design of work-based learning qualifications. It operates at all levels, from certificate through to masters and is based on a credit system. The framework contains a bank of 'tool' modules, all authorised, which can be taken out and filled in with specific learning outcomes for individual programmes. It can also be used by students to negotiate an individual learning pathway relating to an area of work. Approval panels meet monthly so there is little 'waiting time' for new programmes or employee learning plans.

19. Echoing findings from an earlier CIHE study by Connor and Hirsh, 2008.

20. This is true, for example, of executive education in Business Schools which may be accredited by organisations such as the Institute of Directors (IoD), Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM), Chartered Institute of Personnel Directors (CIPD), Chartered Institute of Management (CIM) and/or Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA); as well as Computing and IT which may, for example, be accredited under the Microsoft Certified Professional or Cisco schemes.

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- Quality control in this example is assured through a number of processes: approval panels with members separate from the faculty of life-long learning; information on the employers and approval of the suitability of their staff who will support the work; clear contracts with all involved and training in facilitation for the work-based staff for their role as Associate Tutors.

Another organisation using a similar approach had found it took them five years to develop their flexible accreditation framework and it needed a strong senior-level champion to bring it to fruition. They still felt, however, that there may not be much demand for this from employers.

Some of the case organisations had been pioneers in more flexible accreditation but it seemed that institutions had mostly 'gone it alone' in this field, developing an approach and then seeking to get it approved by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). Although there had been some informal knowledge sharing, there does seem to be a great deal of duplication of effort here by individuals and a lack of clarity for the HE sector as a whole[21]. A rather intractable issue for generic accreditation frameworks that may be used by multiple institutions remains which institution issues the award.

Looking at the accreditation issue overall, it seems that HE might benefit from thinking about quality issues more broadly and not always conflating them with accreditation processes. Everyone was agreed that employers need to see HEIs as high quality learning providers, but not everyone felt that increasing amounts of assessment and accreditation were the route to this. One institution was actively seeking to decrease the amount of assessment its students experienced, feeling over-assessment was taking time and energy away from teaching and learning.

If HE is going to be able to respond more flexibly to the needs of both employers and students, it does seem as though assessment and accreditation processes need to be lighter and more responsive. If accreditation in the workplace is desirable, then such processes also have to be cheaper so that HE provision does not carry with it an excessive burden of accreditation costs.

4.5 Summary

In this chapter we have examined the impact of EE on the structures for teaching and learning in HEIs. Key points include:

- In looking at the impact of EE on teaching and learning we must recognise that engaging employers with HE is much broader than just tailoring courses for people already in work. Indeed, whilst some HEIs are not entering the WFD marketplace to a significant degree, all are greatly strengthening the work experience and employability of their students, and working closely with employers to achieve this. Increasingly the role of EE in teaching and learning is impacting on all areas of provision through the involvement of employers in curriculum design; course delivery; careers guidance; development of 'employability skills'; work experience and student placements; and more flexible approaches to accreditation.

- The case institutions in this study were mostly committed to dialogue with employers (and other external stakeholders) over the broad content of their degree programmes. This type of EE takes place at several levels in HEIs and needs to be a two-way discussion about the evolving needs of a sector or profession in relation to the evolving nature of an academic field. The term 'demand led' does not accurately capture the two-way nature of this process, and developing a mature dialogue of this kind takes time and effort. In many cases professional bodies and employer associations offer an important point of interface between HEIs and employers.

- Innovations in teaching and learning driven, at least in part, through EE are becoming increasingly influential and leading to more flexible, modular structures for both teaching and accreditation. These include the development of clearer learning and progression 'pathways'; the increasing prevalence of 'blended learning' approaches (comprising e-learning, work-based and experiential assignments, and face-to-face interaction); and the integration of 'employability' skills (such as teamwork and communication) into the core curriculum. There remain some technical issues, however, around mixing and matching different forms of funding (e.g. from employers and/or HEFCE) and 'levels' of study.

- In developing a more employer-centric approach to teaching and learning, however, HEIs must remain alert to the needs and requirements of individual learners who may struggle, for example, with the idea of 'online learning', and bring a host of different expectations and demands than traditional full-time UG and PG students (for whom universities generally cater quite

21. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has recently been undertaking work on approaches to employer-responsive provision and institutional issues, and is in the process of issuing a reflective report on WBL and EE, which may lead to changes in its Code of Practice

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well). The increasing emphasis on accrediting and recognising prior learning carries substantial implications for programme administration, recruitment and progression; and the expansion and diversification of the student body places new demands on student support services (including careers advice) – many of these issues are yet to be fully addressed.

- Ensuring that all students are well prepared for their working lives is seen by institutional leaders as the single most important manifestation of HE serving the wider economy and community. Two areas of 'employability' activity were key in most of the institutional strategies: the delivery of employability skills within the curriculum and increasing work experience during study. These concerns are not restricted to post-92 institutions or those needing to attract better quality students. Several cases had strong and public commitment to giving all students some work experience, and some were employing additional staff to find such opportunities.

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5. Communicating and Embedding Employer Engagement

Strategies for employer engagement raise a good many structural and practical issues which have been covered in Chapters 3 and 4. However, the institutions in this study were also aware of some less tangible, but equally important, implications for HE institutions. These 'softer' issues concern:

- building and sustaining relationships with employers

- branding and promotion of what HEIs can offer employers

- employer engagement as culture change, and

- how institutions support, reward and recognise academics for working with employers.

5.1 Building and sustaining relationships with employers

The organisational responses to the idea of EE which have been examined in Chapters 3 and 4 deal with quite a disparate range of tasks which EE may lead to: developing new courses and approaches to WBL; integrating employability into the curriculum; consulting employers etc. Once we see engagement in this way we run the risk of losing the holistic and more strategic ideas about engagement examined in Chapter 2. These are important because they link engagement with the core missions of HE, rather than seeing it as an additional set of activities.

Several of the case organisations struggled somewhat with maintaining an overall vision once they got into looking at specific activities. One bridge between the two is holding onto the idea of 'engagement' as being about relationships rather than activities. Relationships with employers are about the core missions of teaching and research, not just WFD. The idea of relationships also side-steps terms like 'demand-led' as a relationship is a two way thing and comes closer to HE's real experience of what employers are looking for.

> *"Our strategy is to build strong, strategic relationships with key employers that can be cut in many different ways... our favourite employers to work with are those: a) who know what they want, b) can resource it, and c) the relationship can spread to other things." (Director Research and Knowledge Transfer, pre-1992 university, case 3)*

The idea of building relationships acknowledges the time it takes to build real understanding and to secure a 'sale'.

> *"Employer engagement takes a very long time to develop and you may not know what outcomes will be achieved until a lot later. You need to find opportunities to build trust and offer what is needed rather than just what you can provide. Many things can get in the way." (Vice Principal, University College, case 7)*

It also builds increased engagement from the links which already exist:

> *"Every area has its natural connections with employers. It is a myth that people in universities are not well connected externally. You need to find the reason an employer wants to connect – recruiting graduates, influencing the curriculum, research. You have to go with what the employer wants." (PVC Teaching and Learning, post-1992 university, case 4)*

Some institutions were happy to develop a wide range of relationships with a large number of employers – in a sense a web of relationships with the local economy and community. Others were seeking what they called 'strategic relationships', by which they often meant a number of strands of involvement sustained over time. These relationships tended to be with larger employers. Even with strategic relationships, institutions wished to concentrate on activities in line with their institutional strengths.

- several HEIs with medical schools or education departments already had very rich relationships with the relevant employers – the NHS or local authorities. In such cases, the boundaries between the HEI and the employer were often quite blurred.

- one university with a strongly civic orientation talked about 'investing' in relationships with employers in their locality, both

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large and small. This institution saw CPD as enriching their attraction to employers as indicated in the following quote:

> *"It (CPD/WFD) can add another dimension to the relationship. There were researchers who already had a link with an organisation, because they were talking with them already. They had been talking about research but not getting anywhere, but when they went out and talked to them about a particular sort of training, it added an extra dimension, added to their credibility, and led to the organisation wanting to do research with them. … We sell it [CPD] as an integrated part of the relationship." (Higher Level Skills Manager, pre-1992 university, case 8)*

- at least two cases were building strategic relationships with employers in sectors where they had research synergy. In one of these there was a deliberate intention to increase the amount of CPD with these employers. The other university was more focused on consulting and work placements as extensions of existing research and recruitment relationships. It also expected that some of these organisations would be users of their business school executive education. This university was seeking about 15 or 20 employers as truly strategic partners.

> *"I don't think we will get above 20 for these strategic relationships because we couldn't manage any more – and if the twenty are working why would we want more?" (Director of Careers Service, pre-1992 university, case 5)*

- another university was using Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) as a form of applied research that could help build stronger relationships with employers that may develop into other opportunities over time

- a couple of cases were adding links with employers' learning and development functions to deepen the relationship, sometimes hosting these external L&D organisations on their campuses.

Once HEIs started focussing on relationships, they became aware of the importance of the individuals who actually have that relationship and the need to support, rather than supplant, them as indicated below.

> *"I have a belief at the moment that if we over-codify engagement with employers we will kill it. My strategy is that where it is working well, leave it alone. But we can nurture these relationships." (Dean of Engineering, pre-1992 university, case 5)*

Alumni are also an important point of contact with employers once they have entered the job market and may become important ambassadors for the university. At least one institution in our study had recently invested significantly in a team of staff to engage with alumni in seeking donations and business opportunities for teaching and research.

5.2 Branding and promotion

Employer engagement is seen by some HEIs as a way in which they can differentiate themselves and create a strong external brand - several institutions were using words like 'business' or 'enterprise' on their websites and in their literature to do this. As the EE strategy evolves, the brand has to evolve too. Several institutions talked about their brands:

- One institution which has successfully branded itself as 'business-facing' is now considering whether this term says enough about their central commitment to students. Research also needs to remain part of the brand as it is of considerable importance to both students and employers.

> *"If we are not doing leading edge work, we lose our brand. It's not fair to see some institutions as ' teaching led' and others as 'research led' – it's not that simple now." (Dean of Business School, post-1992 university, case 4)*

- Another was using the term 'enterprise' rather than business and saw this as potentially applying to the whole institution – from the student experience to CPD to new technologies, widening participation etc. But like the one above, it also wanted to boost its research reputation.

- For another the broad idea of developing 'professionals' was central and implied ethical as well as technical aspects. This institution also saw itself as clearly international in brand.

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- Another institution (a University College) was trying to pack all the features of HE into its profile as "a high quality, teaching led, research informed institution". They would like their brand to convey the complex interactions between these activities, for example the way applied research is "demand-led in response to the particular interests of employer partners" and feeds directly back into teaching provision. They also wanted to position themselves as focused on vocational and professional development.

Each of these messages can be difficult to convey through traditional marketing channels and, as illustrated below, may depend heavily on the contribution of academic staff.

> *"The most effective marketing tool for the university is its academic community in conversation with external agencies. When you get big complicated projects you may need to insert a more significant level of central coordination but you want to avoid that as far as possible. What you want to do as far as possible is get academics in direct contact with business." (Director of Business Development, pre-1992 university, case 8)*

Several people commented, however, that for all the effort on branding and marketing, employers still did not know what was really on offer or what the institution was most interested in doing with employers. Indeed, a number felt that their institutions may be sending out 'mixed messages' by, for example, stressing their desire to focus on high-value, research-informed education, whilst continuing to develop foundation degrees. Such messages may be both unclear to employers as well as staff within the institutions[22]. Several institutions agreed that the general area of external communications to employers was due for review. They saw a need for clearer practical guidance on how employers could get involved with the institution and what services might benefit them.

5.3 Employer engagement as culture change

For those working in HE, especially academic staff, the EE agenda can be seen as a significant culture change and symptomatic of changing opinions on the role and purpose of HE in society. However this required more careful unpicking in the case institutions, both in the extent of real culture change and which aspects of organisational culture were changing.

5.3.1 The need for a clear internal message

As we have seen in this project, the term 'employer engagement' is very difficult to get a handle on. It seems to have become an umbrella term for a range of fairly disparate activities. This lack of clarity may in itself make staff in universities feel rather unsettled and hostile. How do you sign up for something when you are not sure what it is you are signing up to?

The first step in managing the change process is therefore for the top team to help people understand what is really meant and what it might mean for them personally. This is a leadership issue with substantial implications for roles and structures across organisations. In many institutions in our study there had been recognition over the past 2-3 years of the significance of EE and its incorporation into the portfolio of senior level staff. Where front-end staff with a remit for developing and supporting EE do not have access to senior level influence they can find it very challenging.

From our interviews it became clear that a few institutions have been so busy branding themselves externally that they may have spent insufficient time and effort explaining these changes to their own staff and preparing them for the demands that this will place on them. In one institution this change had also been associated with wide scale redundancies and the closure of satellite sites and hence was perceived quite cynically by a number of staff. Others, as we see below, understand that both communication and involvement are part of the change process.

22. This observation is supported through a comparison of findings from this report with the earlier one based on an analysis of case studies of development interventions. A number of these were in the same institutions and demonstrated a mismatch between top-level strategy and what is happening on the ground.

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5.3.2 Engaging with employers is not new

Messages about what needs to be differently maybe need to be put in the context of what is already there. Many of those interviewed were keen to stress that the histories of their organisations, as described in Chapter 2, had always embodied strong links with employers and wider society. This was especially true for universities with strong subject presence in vocational subjects like engineering, health or the creative arts, or with strong research links with particular sectors (as in biological science for example). They were keen to send an internal message that EE was not something new to be done in addition to existing obligations and indeed was something that academic staff were already heavily involved in. Several also made the links with research clear to staff – not just restricting the definition of EE as WFD as indicated in the following quotes.

> *"There's a strong tradition of working with employers, seen as almost the raison d'être of being an applied university. It's in their [the staff's] blood'..... – You don't need to tell departments to engage with employers." (PVC for Teaching and Learning, pre-1992 university, case 1)*

> *"Employer Engagement is nothing new. That's the problem - that it becomes a label. The university has traditionally done a lot of professional training for a lot of employers. I would like to see more exchange between employers and us. Employer Engagement is multi-dimensional in the Teaching & Learning side and it is coming from all parts of the university. It is not owned by anyone. It is far more embedded than people realise - it just has not been labelled… It just seems that the minute it is labelled anxiety or paralysis sets in." (Director of Enterprise, post-1992 university, case 6)*

> *"So our approach has been to say to academics - who have a lot of engagement already, through research collaboration with companies - to say 'when you are engaged with collaborative research think about the skills and training element'. That's not so far from people's comfort zone. You've got to use the discourse, the frameworks that people understand." (PVC for Teaching and Learning, pre-1992 university, case 8)*

- One institution had used some development funding to run workshops for staff to elicit examples of where they were already working closely with employers. This was intended to take some of the anxiety out of the phrase 'employer engagement' and gently encourage a more positive attitude.

> *"… there have always been members of academic staff who've been involved with employers formally or informally. But now it has an institutional focus and it's developed more interest. When [the development manager] ran 2 or 3 workshops last year, 20-30 came to each workshop. If anyone had run that 4 years previously they would have had far lower attendance. The engagement with employers has gained more credibility." (Dean of PG Studies, pre-1992 university, case 8)*

- Other institutions had used initiatives such as the Higher Level Skills Project to publicise and build their confidence about working with employers. See Chapter 6 for further details.

5.3.3 Involving staff in developing EE

It is widely known that people are more willing to embrace change when they can participate in, and contribute to, the framing of such change. Some HEIs were taking a fairly relentlessly 'top down' view of the need to increase EE and more or less ordering academics to co-operate. Others were feeling their way to a more participative change process:

- one had used some of their pump-priming funding to involve staff in workshops to flesh out the university's strategic plan, including several aspects of EE activity. So although the main thrust of the plan came from the top team, much of its implementation was staff led. This was seen as part of a culture change process in which top team members were also very visible and engaged with staff.

> *"You need leadership and clarity from the top. You need to put the resources and time in to change the culture of a university." (Director of university-based training company, post-1992 university, case 4)*

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In each case, institutions described a tension between the centralisation and decentralisation of EE responsibilities and the need to achieve an appropriate balance.

5.3.4 Changes in general ways of working

Some of the most interesting aspects of culture change to emerge were not specifically about working with employers, but the need to be generally more flexible and responsive. Several institutions had found that they needed to become more explicit about priorities and resource allocation in order to become more responsive.

- one institution captured this change in the phrase 'being business-like' - strongly linked to being much more highly focused on the student experience – as in this was the core of their business. It used business disciplines to agree goals and priorities for both departments and with individual staff. Budgets followed these agreed goals and priorities and if something was not an agreed priority it did not get funded.

> *"Being business-like has been about seeing the students as a 'product' and being clear about how to have the most impact and give the students the right experience. So it is about being absolutely interested in students. It is also about being efficient and being willing to be enterprising." (PVC for Research, post-1992 university, case 4)*

- another institution used the term 'can do' culture to capture the shift they were hoping to achieve. The aim was to help academic staff feel that they could tackle new things, especially with employers, and feel well supported in doing so.

- another used the term 'enterprise' to capture their change – not just specific 'enterprise' activities but being 'enterprising' in the way they approached their work i.e. willing to do things differently, to see opportunities and so on.

Several interviewees saw breaking down the silos within their institutions as a particular aspect of culture change needed for effective EE. Improving communication between the centre and departments was also important as we have seen in some of the structural tensions in Chapters 3 and 4.

- one institution was using the device of academic centres which spanned schools and departments to bring together staff across internal organisational boundaries. As a the head of this organisation said:

> *"There is a somewhat inevitable tension between the centre and departments which can only be ameliorated through coordinating, championing and disseminating information. Efforts need to be made to break down academic silos – we need more dialogue across the institution." (Principal, University College, case 7)*

5.4 Support, reward and recognition of academic staff

We occasionally heard grumbles about academic staff being unwilling to work more closely with employers or undertake new tasks. More often, though, we heard our senior-level interviewees aware of the need for carrots more than sticks to make change happen.

5.4.1 Support

The issue of practical support was a key one. Many academics are concerned (often justifiably) that new activities will plunge them into extra administrative duties as well as academic challenges. The support structures we looked at in Chapter 3 can be seen as enablers of culture change. They may help to establish a new psychological contract for academics which gives them practical and expert support in the non-academic aspects of new initiatives, freeing them to apply their academic knowledge and teaching skills in new ways.

> *"You have to take your staff with you through giving recognition to academics and not loading them with too much administration." (PVC for Research, post-1992 university, case 4)*

It is also important that staff in the new EE support functions, such as business development teams or CPD units, do see their role as supporting academics. So the culture inside these teams is also going to be very important. Universities need to work hard to ensure that a 'them' and 'us' culture does not develop between staff groups.

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Several HE leaders gave examples of how time itself can change attitudes if new practices are consistently applied. One example was in the area of integrating careers teaching into the mainstream curriculum through workshops for students delivered by external experts with an industrial background. At first, academics thought this was taking time away from important academic study. Some students thought this too. After a few years, however, it became accepted as a normal part of the curriculum.

5.4.2 Reward

We looked in Chapter 3 at some of the mechanics being introduced to reward staff in terms of time and/or pay for additional teaching work undertaken with employers. The idea of 'extra' work is satisfactory if CPD/WFD/WBL or consultancy activities are small and somewhat peripheral. If they are large and increasingly the norm then a reward strategy which treats such work as an exception is at odds with the strategy of research-informed teaching.

- one business faculty was making additional teaching an explicit matter of choice. Staff could choose whether to get extra pay for any extra work or to negotiate a lower amount of 'normal' teaching and marking.

- others wanted to see work for employers or in the workplace as treated the same as any other teaching work

> *"Why should it be treated differently? Isn't it just another way of delivering an existing programme?" (Director of Enterprise, post-1992 university, case 6)*

5.4.3 Recognition and promotion

Even if paid for, will EE activities really be seen as important? As always with cultural change, staff will be watching senior-level staff to see if they role model the new values themselves. Will they really spend time with employers? Will they support staff who are seeking to respond to employers' interests or needs?

One of the most significant unresolved issues is whether staff that put much of their energy into EE activities will be promoted alongside their colleagues who stick to a more conventional academic route and achieve high research ratings, as indicated in the following quotes:

> *"That is the 64 thousand dollar question. Do I believe people get recognition for this? Yes I do, because I'm one of them. Do all my academic colleagues believe one can build a career based not solely on research excellence? No, they don't, despite individuals being promoted for teaching and engagement, there are many who believe you can't get on other than through research." (Dean of PG studies, pre-1992 university, case 8)*

> *".. the bigger issue is, especially for younger people coming in with a PhD, joining academia, the issue of where do you want to go long term? What is it that will get you to professor level? And it probably isn't CPD. If you are already a professor, that's fine. Otherwise, up to that point, it's research, international reputation, publishing.... Within [our university] there is a shift. We can do lots to make CPD attractive, interesting, reward people. But the outside market place does have a bearing on how it's viewed." (Head of CPD, post-1992 university, case 10)*

The key issue in terms of whether or not enduring cultural change occurs depends on the extent to which staff see evidence of their institutions 'walking the talk'. As long as disadvantages of engaging with employers are perceived to outstrip the benefits then wide scale change is unlikely within existing structures.

5.5 Summary

'Employer engagement' can mean change in the cultural aspects of HEIs and their strategic messages, both inside and outside, as well as in their structures, processes and resources.

- It can be useful to see EE less in terms of a lot of different activities and more in terms of how an HEI wishes to build relationships with a range of external organisations. This raises useful questions about which employers an HEIs wants relationships with

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and how these relationships might develop over time. Some are looking for wide ranging links with a limited number of large employers; others want to work with many employers. Some are looking for global companies as strategic partners; others are working with local authorities or the health sector. Some are forging links with small firms, usually locally.

- EE is a way in which HEIs can differentiate themselves and create a strong external brand. Employers need to understand what concrete offers lie behind the brand. An institutional image which is designed to be attractive to employers may not always play well with students and other stakeholders. Evolving strategic messages are now more clearly linking ideas of HE engaging with business or enterprise together with that of a student experience which prepares people for work and ideas about innovation, linking the brand to research.

- There is a need for messages about EE to be clear inside the institution as well as outside it. The top team need to help all staff understand what they really mean by 'employer engagement' (if the term is to be used) and how big a change in the institution they are expecting.

- If significant change is required, it helps to use concepts of change management in implementing an EE strategy. For example, it can help staff to see EE as an evolution of the institution, especially if its history has always had a strong vocational, civic or community purpose. It can also help if the development of the EE strategy is 'bottom up' as well as 'top down'. Some institutions are involving their staff very actively in deciding what EE activities are going to be useful, especially at departmental level.

- Linking back to some of the changes in structures and systems described in chapters 3 and 4, an HEI which can respond to employers needs to be able to have open discussions about workload, reward, recognition and how to change staff priorities over time. Universities have not always been very good at having such discussions and reaching clear agreements about individual and collective priorities. This is probably the most important aspect of culture change required by EE – and it is a change in ways of working not specifically in attitudes to employers.

- Progress is being made in recognising the work academic staff do in EE through supporting them better and giving them time or money for such activities. A major unresolved issue is whether academics who actively support the EE agenda will find their endeavours are also recognised in HE promotion systems.

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6. Changing Contexts for Employer Engagement

In this chapter we consider the extent to which the EE landscape is changing and how institutions are adapting their approaches in the light of these changes. Key themes include:

- **Evolving approaches to EE:** all institutions in our study demonstrated a long and varied history of EE and an ongoing process of adaptation and change.
- **The impact of EE initiatives:** recent government policy on higher level skills has meant that substantial amounts of public funding have been used to support and enhance HE-EE – what has been the impact of these initiatives within sample institutions?
- **Impact of the recession:** there have been major changes to the economic climate over the last couple of years – to what degree and in what ways is this impacting upon HE-EE?
- **Future plans, aspirations and challenges:** amongst the sample institutions what are the main aspirations, plans and challenges for future development in EE?

Each of these points will now be described in turn.

6.1 Evolving approaches to employer engagement

We have already described how many institutions in our sample have developed their EE strategy incrementally over time and adapted their support infrastructure accordingly. What was particularly striking from our interviews, however, was the extent to which in many cases the route taken could be traced back to the very origins of the institution (a fact not widely promoted internally in many cases).

Six of the universities in our study could trace their history back to technical colleges; two were founded as teacher training colleges for the church; one as a medical college; and the other as a school of art. In each case, the institutions had been established in direct response to the employment needs of a period in time (often 100-150 years ago) and had expanded and adapted over the years in order to meet changing demands for higher education. In more recent history, four of the institutions had been polytechnics with a strong vocational orientation that were awarded university status in 1992, and two were university colleges, both of which have achieved award-giving powers in recent years. Of the 'old' (pre-1992 universities) in our sample, two still have strong technical links to industry and the other two could be regarded as 'civic' or 'liberal arts' universities.

Thus, within each of the 10 HEIs in our study a clear relationship with particular employers, industries and/or occupations could be traced back over many years and served as a core pillar of organisational mission, identity and culture. To this extent, within none of them could 'employer engagement' or 'workforce development' be regarded as new activities. Each had a long history of preparing graduates for work and of liaising closely with industry partners (including public and third sector organisations) in the development of curriculum, work experience opportunities, and recruitment initiatives.

The current emphasis on EE within government policy and the implications for the funding of HE, however, have been taken as an opportunity by a number of institutions to review and restate their commitment to working with employers and meeting the employment needs of current and future generations of students. A number of post-1992 institutions, in particular, appear to have taken this as an opportunity to differentiate themselves within the HE marketplace, with at least three of them in our sample now adopting a strap-line descriptor which clearly states their commitment to working with, and meeting the needs of business. Such a trend, however, does not necessarily indicate a wholesale shift in their approach, but rather a renewed emphasis on the initial mission of the institution.

From the interviews conducted for this study we came to recognise that what interviewees were describing was a journey in which EE was a guiding force rather than a final destination.

> *"Learn about your institution and don't try and make your institution into something it does not want to be. If you're not buying into the mission of your institution you've got a problem." (PVC for Education, pre-1992 university, case 5)*

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6.2 The impact of employer engagement initiatives

Over recent years substantial pump-prime investment has been made available to assist HE-EE. Initiatives include:

- The HEFCE Higher Level Skills Pathfinder (HLSP) projects in South West, North West and North East England which "aim to find ways of connecting employers and higher education (HE) on a regional basis"[23].
- Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNS), supported by the HEFCE Strategic Development Fund (SDF), to "improve the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through higher education"[24].
- Expansion of Foundation Degrees, and their focus on work-based learning and employer involvement, and the additional HEFCE funding and student places associated with them[25]
- The HEFCE Economic Challenge Investment Fund (ECIF) to help "higher education institutions and further education colleges support individuals and businesses affected by the recession"[26].
- The HEFCE Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) "designed to support and develop a broad range of knowledge exchange activities which result in economic and social benefit to the UK"[27].
- The HEFCE Employer Engagement fund to enable (employer) co-funded additional student numbers (ASNs) for those in employment, and the allocation of strategic development funds from institutions[28].
- European Social Fund (ESF) projects to support HE-EE[29].
- Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs), funded by the UK government, to "help businesses and organisations to improve their competitiveness and/or productivity through the use of the knowledge, technology and skills that reside within academic institutions"[30].
- The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) and Higher Education Academy (HEA) Change Academy programme for "teams of academics to develop the knowledge, capacity and enthusiasm for achieving complex institutional change to benefit the student learning experience"[31].

Together these national initiatives, along with numerous regional and sector initiatives[32], have offered a raft of support for HEIs to enhance the scale and quality of their interactions with employers. Inevitably, however, much of this funding is only available for a limited period and hence its long term impact is dependent on institutions finding ways of embedding EE activity in a sustainable manner.

At the time of this research a number of significant initiatives were coming towards their end (e.g. HLSP, LLNs) and we asked interviewees to reflect, where appropriate, on how such funding had helped support and build their EE capacity.

Seven out of the 10 institutions in our study had been involved in some way with one of the three HEFCE higher skills pathfinder projects and, of these, a number emphasised how this initiative had helped them to develop and expand CPD and WFD provision (although it may be hard to quantify to what extent), as indicated below.

> *"The Higher Skills Project did get us going on [CPD] more at an institutional level. … Also civil engineering, marine engineering, are coming up with more courses that are demand led, also museum studies, speech therapy, architectural planning, a whole lot of areas where it's not core areas, but in addition to the programmes they are doing they are delivering activity to their sectors, they are working with employers. … But when you say that, referring to extra CPD, we must remember that with the medical school, and dental school, they are all delivering professionally qualified people to those sectors. It's quite difficult to segregate the extra CPD out from our core activity." (PVC for Teaching and Learning, pre-1992 university, case 8)*

- At another institution the Business Development Manager spoke of how the senior team had been heavily involved in the HLSP and that it had been used as a platform for much of their subsequent work on EE. S/he also indicated how the publicity of particular initiatives achieved through this process had helped to build the confidence of those involved and raised the profile of the HEI as a strategic player within the region's HE infrastructure despite its relatively small size.

23. http://www.hefce.ac.uk/econsoc/employer/path/, accessed 11/11/09
24. http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/lln/, accessed 11/11/09
25. See: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/econsoc/employer/founddeg/, accessed 11/11/09
26. http://www.hefce.ac.uk/econsoc/challenge/, accessed 11/11/09
27. http://www.hefce.ac.uk/econsoc/buscom/heif/, accessed 11/11/09
28. See http://www.hefce.ac.uk/econsoc/employer/funding/provision/, accessed 11/11/09
29. See, for example, http://www.lsc.gov.uk/regions/SouthWest/esf/esf-news/Proactive+Employer+Engagement.htm, accessed 11/11/09
30. http://www.ktponline.org.uk/academics/default.aspx, accessed 11/11/09
31. http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/supportteam/academy/, accessed 11/11/09
32. Often coordinated and funded by Regional Development Agencies, the Learning and Skills Council, Sector Skills Councils, etc.

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- A similar view was given at another institution, where the Director of WBL said:

> *"The Higher Skills project has been an important and positive experience for the university and given a basis upon which to develop this work." (Director of WBL, post-1992 university, case 9)*

- This same institution spoke of how the HLSP had enabled them to develop and pilot training solutions for a public-sector employer which they could now promote to similar organisations in other locations.

- A fourth institution had used the HLSP to develop and pilot a flexible accreditation framework for WBL.

To this extent, one of the outcomes of the HLSP can be considered as capacity building both in terms of developing a wider range of provision, expanding infrastructure to deal with WBL, and cultural change through awareness raising and celebrating success.

This, like all fixed-term projects, however, faces a number of challenges in making these changes sustainable in the long-term as indicated in the following quote.

> *"Currently we are in a transition period, as the pathfinder project ends, where previously there were project goals and outcomes we had to meet, now we need to think about what services we are offering internally and externally, so I've been going around talking to deans and heads of school and individual academics to ask them what it is [that our university] has to offer and what kind of service they should offer... The fact that there was development funding made it favourable at the level of the school, where income came to the schools. Now we have to work more to the priorities of heads of schools and faculties, if they are going to build it into the workload model and don't need extra time bought out. They will tell staff that they are going to develop a course and they will take away one of their teaching points. They shouldn't have to do it in own time if it's built into their teaching load." (Higher Skills Development Manager, pre-1992 university, case 8)*

The key thing here is how to embed these processes within an ongoing organisational structure in a way that both contributes to the core missions of the HEIs as well being economically advantageous. An observation from the South West HLSP, in particular, where Higher Skills intermediaries were housed within a number of specific institutions despite having a broader remit for higher skills across the region or sub-region, was that many were becoming assimilated within the business, research and enterprise units of their host institutions. To this extent the HLSP offered a fast-track development process for these people and a network of contacts that, over time, made them highly sought after in those institutions that valued such roles.

Other funding sources discussed during the interviews included one institution that had used the LFHE/HEA Change Academy process to spearhead a strategic reorientation and culture change process. Another institution had found the LLN initiative significant in developing their FD provision and establishing vocational and work-based routes in higher level skills provision (coordinated through restructuring of their Division of Lifelong Learning).

Sources such as the ECIF and co-funded ASNs were largely being used to subsidise the cost of programmes for employers (particularly SMEs) although in many cases institutions found the co-funded ASN model difficult to implement in practice due to a difficulty in securing employer contributions. Such initiatives, it would appear, generally operate by make existing provision more accessible rather than leading to the development of substantial new forms of provision.

There remains uncertainty over the extent to which particular initiatives can be considered 'value for money' and inevitably, some institutions gain substantially more benefit than others (perhaps in part due to where they are in terms of developing their own EE strategy and provision). Due to the diversity of the sector and how different HEIs are orientating themselves towards the higher skills market it would seem that a diversity of funding options remains the most appropriate solution.

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6.3 Impact of the recession

Since the HE-EE agenda was launched as a key pillar of government policy[33] and many of the initiatives outlined above were put in place the economic situation has fundamentally changed[34]. The economic recession following the banking crisis of 2007-2008 has seriously affected the financial situation, reducing the availability of funding for HE from both private and public sectors. Given these changes, we were interested to hear how HEIs felt that this had impacted on both their strategy and experience of EE. From the responses a number of themes can be identified.

- In the short-term, most institutions have experienced an increase in demand for full-time student places – partly through people taking the opportunity to 'ride out the recession' and/or take the opportunity to reskill following redundancy and/or difficulties in finding employment.
- Demand for tailored executive education and sponsored MBAs has substantially diminished as companies reduce their training budgets and allowances. ECIF funding, however, has opened some new opportunities and enabled a range of institutions to engage in a different way with existing clients and/or build links with new contacts.
- A number of institutions have experienced an increase in demand for applied research and consultancy as an alternative to organisations employing commercial consultants.
- In the medium term, institutions anticipate substantial reductions in government funding for HE (on a per-student basis) and the need to put in place sustainable funding structures (often through full-cost recovery programmes).
- In the medium to long-term it is anticipated that the market for HE provision will become even more competitive and that there will be greater differentiation between institutions in terms of research-focus, business focus, levels of qualification, etc. It is also anticipated that not all HEIs will prosper in this environment and some may close[35].

Overall, the HEIs in our sample were optimistic about their futures and did not feel that the recession would have a fundamental impact on their approach to EE unless it continued for more than 2-3 years. A number had put in place temporary arrangements to enable the maintenance of relationships with employer partners who were unable to fund their engagement with HE in the short-term. Several stressed a sense of moral obligation to supporting organisations through the recession and of taking a long-term view on relationships.

For several institutions the recession was taken as vindication for recent initiatives to cut costs and to expand and develop relationships with a wide range of partners. It had also offered a number of new opportunities, particularly in regards to engaging with SMEs through funds such as ECIF.

For those institutions most dependent on government funding through the HEFCE teaching grant there were some concerns about how future funding cuts might impact on their ability to deliver all of their institutional missions.

6.4 Working in partnerships

As discussed in section 3.1.2 and earlier Higher Level Skills Research Reports[36] EE initiatives often place strong demands on HEIs to work in partnership with other organisations. In reflecting on their experiences of working in partnerships a number of key partners were identified by interviewees. Experiences of working in partnerships varied between interviewees, initiatives and institutions. Key groups of partners are described below.

- **FE colleges:** four of the HEIs in our sample had well established partnerships with a network of FE providers in their region and the remainder had at least some experience of partnering with FE for particular programmes. Where relationships existed these predominantly involved the provision of FDs although in a number of cases extended to other initiatives (including one where the HEI was providing professional CPD for college staff). For those institutions heavily involved in the provision of HE at NQF level 4 their relationships with FE were an integral part of their delivery infrastructure. For those institutions more focussed on high-end qualifications (particularly at PG level) their relationships with FE were sometimes more challenging.

33. This can be largely traced to publication of the Leitch report in 2006, although the roots go back to earlier reports such as DfES (2003) '21st Century Skills: realising our potential' and the Lambert (2003) 'Review of Business-University Collaboration'.
34. With the obvious exception of the ECIF.
35. A point echoed in the recent DBIS (2009) report 'Higher Ambitions: the future of higher education in a knowledge economy'.
36. See, for example, Bolden, Connor, Duquemin, Hirsh and Petrov (2009).

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- **Other HEIs:** a number of institutions described partnerships with other HEIs that tended to be broader than their relationships with FE. Examples included a consortium of HE providers (including FE colleges delivering and accrediting HE) within a city region that collaborated to meet the higher level skills needs of their community (this initiative was supported through the provision of co-funded ASNs). Another example included a regional network of research-intensive universities collaborating on an initiative for HE-employer research studentships. In a number of cases HEIs worked together to meet the specific skills needs of a particular employer and/or industry through pooling specialist expertise (usually on the explicit request of the employer). A further form of collaboration between HEIs involved a network of research-intensive universities partnering on international careers events for students in China and South East Asia. The evidence from our study indicate that HE partnerships on EE tend to develop out of necessity, often to draw down particular funding, rather than out of an explicit aspiration to work in partnership (with the exception of those strategic relationships established with high-ranking international institutions).

- **Professional bodies:** many HEIs in our study collaborated with professional associations and bodies in the development and accreditation of industry-specific qualifications. These covered a wide range of sectors and occupations including health, finance, construction, computing and IT, engineering, manufacturing, and other professions. In each case HEIs worked in association with these organisations to provide professionally recognised training and CPD (sometimes instead of and sometimes alongside traditional academic qualifications) and to provide advice and guidance on the curriculum. For students such associations were seen to enhance their employability and work readiness; for employers such associations helped to demonstrate the practical and applied nature of learning. In most cases these partnerships were described positively and seen as integral to the education strategy.

- **Private training providers:** a number of HEIs in our study had established relationships with private training providers for a number of reasons. In most cases university-affiliated trainers were used to expand capacity for the provision of bespoke training, carrying out training needs assessments and/or to expand the skills and knowledge base that the HE could offer to employers. In at least one case, however, the relationship also worked the other way such that the HEI delivered programmes on behalf of a well regarded private trainer, which enabled them to enhance their profile and reputation within a particular field of activity. A number of HEIs mentioned that private trainers were their main competitors for bespoke training and that through collaboration a mutually beneficial outcome could be achieved. One institution had addressed this potential tension by establishing its own private training provider (hosted on site) to deliver training that did not fit easily within the traditional model of HE. Another institution, however, stressed that the use of private consultants to deliver programmes is only a temporary solution to meeting demand and is not alternative to building an academic community:

  > *"[If over a period of time we could see] a strong demand, and that it was something we would like to do research in, then we might go out and look to make some short term consultancy type appointments while we make sure there was enough demand that could support that, while we grew the academic capacity. But in the long term we would not want to just use our own reputation to employ consultants to teach courses that we have no long term benefit from. We would not be interested to use our good name to benefit others - that would not be growing and developing the academic community, we are not a business - we are a university." (Higher Skills Manager, pre-1992 university, case 8)*

- **Sector Skills Councils:** SSCs were mentioned as partners by a number of institutions although most felt that these relationships were not as constructive as they could be. Where successful relationships had been achieved, this was primarily in an advisory capacity during the development of foundation degrees and only for a small number of SSCs with interests/expertise closely aligned to the area of work being developed.

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- **Regional Development Agencies:** RDAs were major strategic partners for regional initiatives within a number of participating HEIs. Their role was particularly significant for projects requiring investment of capital (such as the building of a new science and/or business park) although, through their skills agenda, RDAs also had a significant impact on funding provision (particularly that targeted at priority sectors and/or employer groups). Such relationships were often symbiotic, with HEIs contributing heavily towards policy formulation and agreeing priorities, as well as being required to respond to the RDA's remit.

- **Employer networks:** a number of institutions were involved in establishing and maintaining employer networks that could contribute in a number of ways to the work of the HEI such as advising on curriculum developments, assisting careers and student placement activities, funding and framing research, etc. Such partnerships helped HEIs to keep in touch with workplace issues and priorities such that they would be better placed to respond to employer demand in future.

- **Business Link and other brokerage organisations:** a number of institutions spoke of beneficial partnerships with Business Link. One had a close partnership to support organisations hosted within their Innovation Centre (a business incubation service). Another provided Business Link services within its region through a private training organisation established by the university. Business Link was described by one interviewee as an 'honest broker' which was well placed for meeting the needs of SMEs in particular. Overall, despite these examples, institutions in our study were wary of brokerage and intermediary organisations and preferred to liaise directly with businesses themselves.

Despite the recognised benefits of working in partnerships, however, a large number of interviewees expressed challenges about this way of working and a need to choose one's partners carefully as illustrated in the following quotes:

> *"We got married to lots of companies and had links with many overseas universities. I feel we stood on the street corner and got into anybody's car. Let's decide which companies we want to form really close relationships with and ditto international universities. Choose your partnerships and make them work."(Dean of Engineering, pre-1992 university, case 5)*

> *"Personal relationships are vital in partnerships. They can alert you to potential problems - such as cash flow - in advance so that something can be done about it. Previous bad experiences have taught us to be rather more cautious in our relationships and to draft a memorandum of understanding before proceeding too far." (Principal, University College, case 7)*

Indeed, many people stressed the importance of personal relationships and acknowledged that many partnerships, both with employers and other organisations, are dependent on key individuals within each organisation establishing a constructive dialogue. The ability to 'institutionalise' these relationships such that they become broader and more sustainable remains a challenge in many instances and perhaps, at least partly, explains the somewhat ad hoc, emergent and project-based nature of many partnerships.

Furthermore, whilst HEIs may recognise the need to work in partnerships, unless there is a reasonable degree of alignment between strategy, processes and people within each organisation then partnerships can, and often do, falter[37]. In instances where partnerships are established for primarily political or strategic reasons it may be hard to maintain an open and honest relationship and the partnership may become dysfunctional.

6.5 Future plans, aspirations and challenges

Finally institutions were invited to comment on their future plans, aspirations and expected challenges vis-à-vis EE. Responses differed by HEI, although all expected to see their EE activity grow both in terms of demand-led programmes, as well as the extent to which EE is embedded in all aspects of research and education (through, for example, student placements, research impact, etc.).

For those institutions involved in CPD provision and WBL this was an area of activity expected to expand although some concerns were raised over the source of funding for such activity. One HEI indicated that a cap on funded student numbers would adversely affect CPD and PG teaching as it would increase the pressure on HEIs to recoup the full cost of delivery from students and, in the absence of public subsidy, work-based learners may not be sufficiently incentivised. Several institutions highlighted the need to develop robust and sustainable finance systems for dealing with WBL and demand-led education.

37. See Connor and Hirsh (2008) and Bolden et al. (2009) for further elaboration on this argument.

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A number of institutions stressed a need for diversification in their delivery of more traditional programmes (in particular PG study) where an anticipated decline in demand for full-time programmes would need to be addressed through more flexible teaching hours (including courses in evenings, weekends and holidays), delivery modes (including work-based and distance learning) and locations (in businesses and the community rather than just on campus).

A need was also recognised for reviewing accreditation and assessment criteria such that learners could make better use of opportunities outside the classroom. The DVC for Teaching and Learning at one university said: "in future we do not see our students as customers, more as partners". S/he proposed that in time students will take greater control over their studies and setting their own objectives. The DVC for Research at the same university said that assessment should be reduced and become more embedded in the learning process itself: "it is a means to an end not an end in itself".

All institutions expected to see an expansion of their EE activity in relation to student employability and preparation for work. Many had set a target of offering work placements to all full-time students, in some cases making this a compulsory requirement and/or encouraging students to develop wider career experiences.

> *"If we do go down the route of expanding work placements we need to consider whether we are just thinking about discipline-related engagement, which would be a shame because a lot of our students are interested in a wide variety of career avenues. There could be benefit in doing a placement which was not discipline related, for example project management skills, consultancy skills and so on." (Director of Careers Service, pre-1992 university, case 5)*

Many HEIs were also looking to expand their links with international businesses and other partners in order to offer improved placement and education opportunities overseas. This was true of both research-intensive institutions with an international research profile and those more firmly associated with a particular region/area. In all cases, income from overseas student fees was seen as an important part of their funding structure, as well as central to enhancing the institution's profile as a world class centre of expertise. Maximising the benefits of alumni links was also being actively pursued in a number of HEIs as a way of gaining access to organisations and of publicising their work.

The PVC for Education at one research-intensive institution also pointed to the potential impact of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in driving academics to engage more closely with employers in order to demonstrate research impact, as well as placing pressure on subjects such as humanities to demonstrate their impact through increased student placements and applied research.

It was proposed that there would be greater demand for cross-disciplinary work combining contributions from a number of subject areas. Traditional disciplinary boundaries may not match well to the requirements/challenges faced by employers and the contribution that HE can make to major social and environmental issues such as climate change, poverty and health, which will most likely need to draw upon multiple areas of expertise. In order to meet these challenges it may be necessary to challenge the prevalent 'silo' approach within institutions and academic disciplines and to adapt reward and recognition processes accordingly.

A final comment voiced by one of our interviewees was a frustration about the difficulty in really understanding what works in terms of EE and university strategy. S/he proposed that there is a substantial degree of 'storytelling' when discussing the success (or not) of particular initiatives and a great degree of difficulty in "getting behind the rhetoric". Whilst case studies and reports (including the current one) may be able to describe the process of engagement there are virtually no control studies or investigations with objective measures of success. This remains an area for further work.

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6.6 Summary

In this chapter we have explored some of the ways in which contextual factors are impacting upon the nature of HE-EE. Key themes include:

- The extent to which EE within HEIs should be regarded as an evolving journey in which institutions have always aimed to address the needs of employers and society, yet adapted their approaches and positioning over time to meet changing academic, political and market requirements. In several cases the current emphasis on EE and supporting the UK economy are being seized on by institutions as an opportunity to realign themselves with a mission and orientation that may, in some instances, have become somewhat obscured over time.

- Government supported initiatives for the promotion of EE in HE (such as the Higher Level Skills pathfinders) have been used in a number of cases as a stepping stone for significant development and restructuring of EE activity. Whilst they have been useful in developing capacity, however, some questions remain about the long-term financial sustainability of structures and demand for provision that isn't heavily subsidised.

- The current economic recession has had an impact on a variety of strands of EE activity, in particular a major reduction in demand for executive education, CPD and tailored programmes. Other areas of HE activity, however, have fared better and demand for many full time UG and PG programmes is at its highest rate for many years. During this period HEIs are looking to retain and grow employer relationships through an expansion of the various ways in which they can collaborate. In no case was the downturn seen as an excuse for reducing EE, on the contrary, it was regarded as further evidence to support the need for close HE-employer relationships.

- HE-EE and the changing marketplace for higher skills are placing increasing demands on HEIs to collaborate in partnerships with other organisations, including other providers, professional bodies, government and related organisations, and employer groups. This shift carries a number of new and significant challenges for leadership of, within, and between organisations.

- All HEIs in our study are looking to extend their EE activity although mass CPD and WFD remains a significant priority in only a minority of institutions. In many cases a changing relationship with students was anticipated in which they would increasingly be regarded as 'partners' rather than 'customers'. Within this environment, as indicated earlier, the 'student experience' was considered of central importance, along with the 'impact' and contribution of research.

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7. Conclusions

This report has highlighted a number of key issues for HEIs, and those organisations that seek to support them, to consider in terms of their EE strategy. Each chapter has concluded with a summary of findings and the Executive Summary gives an overview of the research as a whole. It is not the aim of this chapter, therefore, to summarise what has been found, but rather to provide some general conclusions and recommendations. We will begin with some key tips and advice from interviewees themselves, followed by broader lessons from the 10 institutional case studies. The chapter concludes by considering how these findings compare with those of our previous study based on case studies of specific HE-EE initiatives and what this might mean for our understanding of employer engagement and the role of HE more broadly.

7.1 Tips and advice from interviewees

Towards the end of each interview interviewees were invited to offer any tips or advice that they had learnt from their experience of HE-EE. Although responses varied between informants and institutions a number of common themes could be identified, as indicated below.

- **Promote the value of EE from the very top of the institution:** a number of interviewees stressed that HE-EE needs to be championed from the very top level within HEIs, although this needs to be balanced and supported by wider scale engagement at all levels as indicated below.

  "You need leadership and clarity from the top... You need to put the resources and time in to change the culture of a university." (Director of university-based training company, post-1992 university, case 4)

- **Secure senior level support from employers:** likewise, for EE to be valued and driven forward within employers it needs senior level support from within the organisation.

  "You need senior level buy-in from employers. Previous experience indicates that this often arises from personal relationships and there can be multiple contact points both within universities and employers." (Head of WBL, post-1992 university, case 9)

- **Be responsive to employer expectations:** interviewees stressed that employers have different expectations from HEIs about issues such as speed of response, flexibility of provision, and demonstrable outcomes, as illustrated in the following quotes.

  "Universities need to recognise that timeframes of business are very different than they are used to; they have to be more responsive, be 'nimble footed' to compete with the private sector in new areas of work or work collaboratively with them...and ..It's about credibility - say what you will do and then deliver it." (PVC Corporate Development, post-1992 university, case 2)

  "When working with employers you need to back it up... don't disappoint... put the customer first." (PVC for Regional Enterprise, post-1992 university, case 9)

- **Educate, support and recognise staff:** academic and administrative staff need to be supported and recognised for their work with employers and offered appropriate development opportunities. Recognition should also be given to personal strengths, motivations and dispositions.

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"Not everyone has to do everything. It's about teams and initiatives not every person doing the same thing." (Dean of Business School, post-1992 university, case 4)

"There is a need to incentivise staff to get involved in such activities and to be more entrepreneurial... Efforts need to be made to break down academic silos – we need more dialogue across the institution." (Principal, University College, case 7)

- **Focus on your strengths and priorities:** universities need to focus attention on areas of strategic significance and to offer a consistent and coherent sense of their approach.

"You can't do everything, so it's deciding which bits you are going to do and then do them properly. If you're not going to do it properly don't even waste your time on it and risk your reputation." (Dean of Engineering, pre-1992 university, case 5)

"Whilst foundation degrees may be promoted as a solution to employer engagement and workforce development, they are often rather responsive and can lead to a series of relatively uncoordinated offerings. The institution needs to be able to articulate a clear and coherent offering externally." (PVC for Education, University College, case 7)

- **Build and maintain relationships:** a key message portrayed within most interviews was the significance of personal and organisational relationships.

"Relationships are critical. It takes time to cross the huge cultural ravine between universities and their commercial partners and their organisational clients."(Director of university-based training company, post-1992 university, case 4)

"Think about how you can encourage employers to come and engage with you without necessarily asking them to recruit a lot of your students – especially in a recession. The whole skills agenda is very helpful with that as they can come onto campus and help you develop the skills of students." (Director of Careers Service, pre-1992 university, case 5)

"Employer engagement takes a very long time to develop and you may not know what outcomes will be achieved until a lot later. You need to find opportunities to build trust and offer what is needed rather than just what you can provide." (PVC for Education, University College, case 7)

- **Put key contacts and relationship structures in place:** to support and maintain relationship building institutions may need to put in place other roles and structures.

"A central point of contact within organisations (both HEIs and employers) is essential to building and maintaining effective relationships." (Business Development Manager, University College, case 7)

"You need a channel for using employer information within the institution. A transparent process to developing and responding to demands would assist the sales and marketing cycle... Need to find a way of sustaining engagement until a solution has been developed or delivered." (Higher Skills Intermediary, post-1992 university, case 9)

Additional recommendations included ensuring that there is real demand from learners for what is being developed/offered, and being careful about the language/terms you use when talking about ideas such as 'business engagement' and 'employability'.

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7.2 Key lessons and points for consideration

Considering each institution as a separate case study the authors identified a number of key lessons. Whilst there is insufficient space to enter into detail here, and for confidentiality reasons we cannot expose too much detail about individual cases, the list below summarises the key lessons identified.

1. **EE is core to the purpose of HE and always has been**

   - EE is not something new. It has long been a core strand of activity within all HEIs.
   - EE is integrally linked to education and research strategies.
   - EE extends to work with public and third sector organisations as well as commercial organisations. Some of these relationships are already deeply embedded, such as with the NHS and teacher training.

2. **The 'learner experience' is a key driver for EE within all types of HEI**

   - Student employability and the quality and impact of research are the main drivers of EE activity within most HEIs. HE also has a wider economic and social purpose, more often focused on fields of work and sectors of the economy than on just supporting individual employers.
   - Universities tend to aim to develop graduates for their professional career rather than a specific employer. There may be some ethical challenges in tailoring provision to meet the requirements of a single employer too closely.

3. **The success of EE is dependent on putting appropriate support systems in place**

   - Internal systems for finance, accreditation, staff recognition and workload allocation need to be adapted to meet the requirements of providing flexible, bite-sized learning to people in work.
   - Getting the systems right can be a great facilitator for working with employers and offering demand led education.
   - Institutions build relationships and areas of strength slowly over time although pump priming funding can accelerate growth and develop capacity in particular areas.
   - Academic silos by structures and disciplinary boundaries can inhibit effective cross-institutional collaboration. EE is one cross-cutting activity that may help break down/transcend these divisions.

4. **Workforce development is just one aspect of EE and not a priority for all HEIs**

   - CPD and WFD whilst a growing area within some institutions does not fit well within the traditional HE infrastructure and may require its own processes and/or staff.
   - FDs, whilst promoted as a mechanism for EE, have variable levels of take up between institutions, may lead to a somewhat fragmented range of offerings and are more often than not delivered by FE partners. Their impact on most universities is limited although they do offer an important progression route into HE and an area in which FE-HE relationships can be developed.
   - The notion of 'demand led' provision can be problematic and underestimate the interactive nature of much course development. It can also be hard to sustain if there are not systems in place to re-use learning products and/or recover the development costs from employers.
   - The term 'workforce development' does not play well in HE. Some HEIs are moving towards terms like 'professional development', as well as 'CPD', to convey more accurately what they are offering to employers and individuals in employment.

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5. **The involvement of academics is key to successful EE**

- Institutions struggle with the degree of centralisation/decentralisation of EE support. In general there is a sense that academics are best placed to liaise with employers but need to be supported in this activity.
- Research remains a significant motivator for academic staff even in teaching-led institutions. Articulating the contribution of EE in this way can be beneficial to securing commitment and engagement from academic faculty.
- Much employer demand is at the top end of the skills spectrum to re-skill the existing professional workforce through short courses or masters modules. This sits more readily with academic interests and their research agendas. It also links with existing academic consultancy to industry.
- EE is regarded as an opportunity to develop new areas of expertise/research. This is as much, if not more, of a motivator for many HEIs than the financial gain from such work (although a balance needs to be achieved).

6. **EE requires culture change, but not of the kind so often assumed**

- Despite popular conceptions, EE is not about restructuring HE to meet the demands of employers (or government), nor about overcoming resistance from academics in their 'ivory towers' – but about developing the resilience and contribution of HEIs within a changing society and HE marketplace.
- Universities wishing to work closely with employers recognise a need to become more 'business-like' and enterprising in the way they work internally as well as externally. This may require significant culture change, not only for HEIs but also for employer organisations who may need to revise their expectations and assumptions about HE.
- Many institutions (especially those that regard themselves as 'world class') are as, if not more, interested in building relationships and partnerships on a national and international basis as on a local/regional basis.
- EE is being taken by a number of HEIs as an opportunity to rebrand/reorientate themselves to their initial mission of meeting the skills needs of their community, or sectors of the national or global economies.

7. **Achieving successful EE is a major leadership challenge for HE**

- EE requires many HEIs to work through collaborative partnerships. Whilst many of these are mutually beneficial some may also pose areas of conflict/competition and the leadership of partnerships is often challenging.
- Successful expansion of EE requires the commitment and involvement of the top team who need to be able to address questions such as 'why are we doing it?', 'what's in it for me?' and 'can I do it?' from academic and support staff. It is largely about sensemaking, communication and articulating a coherent and consistent sense of direction and purpose.
- Top-down strategic leadership of EE needs to be complemented by more emergent bottom-up leadership from the people involved directly in EE initiatives, as well as horizontal/lateral leadership from those with boundary-spanning roles[38]. Leadership across institutional boundaries to influence the activities of partner and stakeholder organisations can be particularly challenging, especially given differences between the mission, purpose and culture of organisations from different parts of the education sector, and different sides of the HE-employer divide.
- The culture change process described above can not be achieved by HEIs alone. To shift social and cultural assumptions about the nature and purpose of HE requires collaboration across the sector and a clear articulation to government and business of the purpose and contribution of HE. For a sector that has seldom spoken with a common voice, informing such discussions in a way that meets the wider interests of HE will be a considerable challenge.

38. For further discussion of the different forms of leadership within HE please refer to: Bolden, R., Petrov, G. and Gosling, J. (2008) Developing Collective Leadership in Higher Education: Final Report. London: Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. URL: www.lfhe.ac.uk/publications/research.html

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7.3 Integrating top-down and bottom-up perspectives on EE

The findings presented in this report are derived from the second of two large scale empirical investigations into the nature of HE-EE conducted to support the South West Higher Level Skills Pathfinder Project. Findings from the first of these studies are described in an earlier report[39] and present, in effect, a 'bottom-up' view of HE-EE through detailed analysis of 27 separate EE initiatives (primarily based around examples of WFD). The current report has aimed to complement these findings through an institution-level perspective in which we have explored how HEIs, as a whole, are positioning themselves with regards to this agenda. Together, these studies offer two powerful lenses through which to consider EE activity within HE. In this final section of the report we will briefly reflect on the similarities and differences between what has been revealed through each of these perspectives, and to consider their implications for those people within and outside the HE sector who are charged with making effective HE-EE a reality.

7.3.1 Similarities and differences between the studies

Similarities between the two studies include:

- **Recognition of the key significance of relationships:** EE is regarded as a relational activity in so far as it involves a two-way (if not more) exchange between partners. Many of these relationships exist on a personal level between individuals in different organisations and, as such, may be hard to embed at an institutional level. Whilst HEIs (and employers) may wish to maximise the benefits of these relationships for their organisations, this needs to be done carefully so as not to undermine the core foundation on which they are based – usually a mutual interest and commitment to a particular issue, and a shared sense of the value that each partner brings to the relationship.

- **A diversity of forms and types of engagement:** Both studies have demonstrated that EE is a broad and wide-ranging concept that spans most areas of HE activity. The previous report illustrated a diversity of partners and how they work together in developing, sustaining and supporting HE-EE initiatives. It also indicated a high degree of innovation and variation between particular forms of activity, such as the development of new programmes, enhancement of existing ones, and the provision and accreditation of flexible work-based learning. The current report has extended this focus to take in the role of EE in traditional UG and PG provision (particularly through the involvement of employers in curriculum design, employability, student placements and work experience, and careers guidance/recruitment), as well as in research. Together these studies highlight many ways in which employers and HEIs can collaborate, and the limitations of a generic 'best practice' approach.

- **A differentiation of mission and priorities between HEIs:** Both studies have indicated that HE is a diverse (perhaps increasingly so) sector and that not all institutions are following the same set of priorities and missions. They have illustrated differences in the relative significance attributed to scholarly research; the prevalence of CPD, WFD and WBL; and levels of qualification[40]. Despite this, however, there is a remarkable degree of similarity in the importance attributed to research-led teaching and an active engagement with social and economic issues. If there is a difference between the USP of HE versus most private training organisations, this is perhaps where it is most evident. HEIs, in general, see themselves as offering 'education' rather than 'training' and this has an important impact on the kinds of programme they offer and the intended learning outcomes.

- **The notion of 'demand-led' provision is misleading:** Both studies have highlighted difficulties in developing programmes from scratch in order to meet specific employer needs. In general there is a degree of negotiation and adaptation required in order to align provision with the interests and capabilities of academic staff, whilst addressing the issues that the employer is seeking to resolve through higher level skills, and remaining sensitive to the needs and expectations of individual learners. Purely demand-led provision is costly to develop and may well not be viable for either organisation due to the amount of time and resource that is required. HEIs, instead, are responding to this challenge through restructuring and decoupling existing products and expertise to produce more modular programmes that can be combined and delivered in a variety of ways.

39. Bolden, Connor, Duquemin, Hirsh, and Petrov (2009).

40. Although these differences do not follow the usual' pre/post-92' or 'teaching/research intensive' divisions often talked about. Indeed, EE was of core significance within many traditional HEIs and research in more vocationally-orientated institutions.

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- **The apparent inflexibility of traditional HE systems and processes:** Both studies also show that traditional HE structures for accreditation, assessment, workload planning and allocation, and academic reward and recognition have not been well suited to the more flexible, responsive learning demanded by employers. Most institutions are reviewing and revising their structures in the light of this and endeavouring to become more customer-responsive and 'business like' although this may be a long process requiring substantial cultural as well as technical and structural change.

- **The benefits and challenges of working in partnerships:** Finally, both studies have demonstrated that effective EE demands a more collaborative, partnership-based approach to HE than is typical of more traditional UG and PG activities. There are clear benefits to be gained from working in partnerships, including increased expertise and capacity, enhanced funding opportunities, and improved awareness and appreciation of the requirements of employers. Challenges, however, include the leadership of partnerships, inter-organisational competition and conflict, and diversity of expectations and outcomes.

In terms of differences, two main areas can be identified:

- **A potential misalignment between top-down and bottom-up approaches:** Several of the case studies of EE initiatives from the last report were conducted in the same HEIs as included in this report. From comparison of the 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' accounts in these institutions it would appear that there are instances where what is espoused from the strategic level is not always reflected in what is happening 'on the ground'. Thus, for example, whilst some institutions expressed little interest in Level 4 qualifications such as FDs they were still engaged in this type of activity. Such situations may send out a mixed message both within the institution itself as well as externally to employers. Whilst we noted a striking degree of consistency and coherence between the accounts of most senior institutional actors in the current study this was not nearly so evident during the previous case studies that indicated a somewhat more ad hoc and reactive approach, often driven by the availability of funding.

- **A shift in emphasis between the relationship of EE to core teaching and research missions:** A second area of difference between the two studies was the extent to which 'employer' or 'business' engagement was seen as a 'third stream' or mainstream activity. From the cases in the previous study, whilst it was concluded that EE was integrally linked to core teaching and research missions, many aspects of it could be considered as discrete activities in themselves. Thus, in a diagram at the end of the report we represented the core missions of HE on a triangle, with teaching as one corner, research another, and business engagement the third as illustrated in the left-hand image in Figure 2 below – with various HE offerings positioned at different places along these three axes and a virtuous cycle connecting all three of them. From the accounts given to us by senior institutional leaders in the current study we saw a far high degree of integration of EE into the core teaching and research missions of HE, with perhaps the exception of CPD/WFD which although linked to other activities may well have its own separate systems and processes and vary in its level of priority within the institution. To this extent we saw a situation more like the right-hand image in Figure 2.

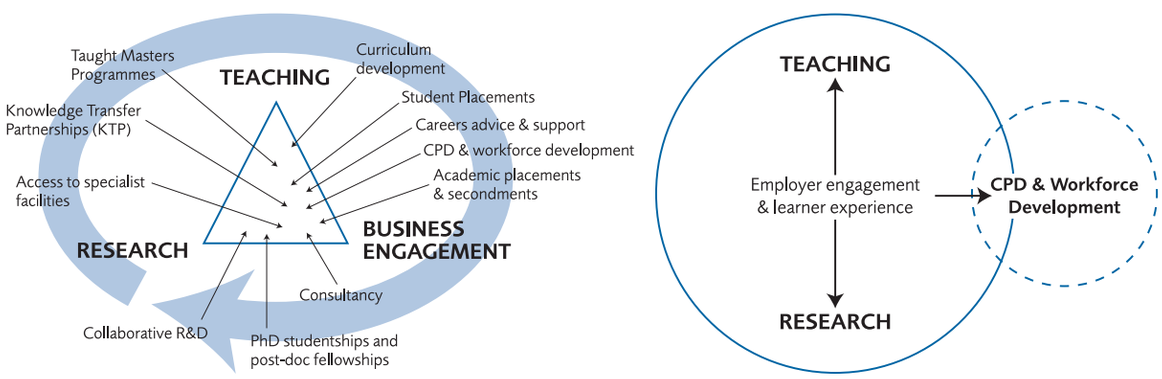

Figure 2 – Alternative conceptualisations of employer engagement

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7.3.2 A systemic approach to developing EE

To conclude then, it is perhaps worth taking a moment to consider the implications of these findings for those people within HE, and the organisations that support it, that are responsible for HE-EE activity.

Overall our findings demonstrate the value of growing EE activity organically – building on successes, areas of strength, reputation and individual and institutional interests and values. Whilst senior level endorsement is clearly important for promoting and supporting EE activity, it needs to foster and nurture initiatives from the ground upwards rather than impose or drive through change in a top-down fashion. A clarity and consistency of message of what forms of EE the HEI seeks to encourage, the types of organisation it seeks to work with, and the manner in which this type of activity will be supported and recognised within the institution, is incredibly helpful, however, in enabling staff within HEIs to prioritise which types of activity to focus their attention on.

Senior level leaders can do a lot to support and resource EE activity and need to communicate the value of this activity in ways that connect to academic and institutional missions. Positioning EE as part of a longer history of engaging with communities and society is helpful in clarifying that it is not just 'the latest fad' but an enduring pillar of HE. Indeed, the current emphasis on EE within policy debates, and the associated lure of funding, may offer an opportunity for institutions to reassert and revisit their legacy and origins. In so doing, however, one must be careful not simply to add it as just another item on the 'to do list' but as an activity that is entwined and embedded in the existing work of academics and their institutions.

The apparent disconnect between some of the EE initiatives discussed in the previous report and the strategies described in this one is not necessarily surprising, nor necessarily that concerning, as long as institutions are continuing to review and revise their approach. Indeed, if EE is an evolving and expanding area of activity it is likely that the direction in which organisations end up heading will arise through an interaction between bottom-up emergent processes and top-down strategic direction[41]. Senior level leaders need to remain alert to these processes if they seek to create an organisation that is truly responsive to changing market needs and to build on areas of strength. We might expect, however, that over time as the focus on EE matures, that institutions become better at articulating both what they won't do as well as what they will do, and that this balance will differ between HEIs.

One area where confusion may arise is in the extent to which EE is associated with CPD, WFD and WBL activities. Much of the policy literature of recent years appears to have reinforced the sense that these are indeed the main forms of EE and areas in which institutions should be focussing their efforts[42]. The findings from both of our studies, however, demonstrate that to a moderate degree these remain peripheral and optional activities (although in no case did an HEI feel it was possible to do away with them entirely). As Figure 2 indicates by equating EE with CPD, WFD and WBL it can appear to be a 'third stream' activity to be balanced alongside the core missions of teaching and research. If, however, we consider the delivery of CPD, WFD and WBL as a somewhat separate activity that institutions can engage with more or less vigorously, and that they may well put in place different structures to support (e.g. delivery partnerships with FE and/or the private sector; flexible accreditation frameworks; separate administrative support teams), then it becomes possible to reconceptualise EE as at the very heart of the mission of HE. This is not to propose that universities either should or could not engage more actively in the development of people for their working lives – indeed this remains a key priority within all of them – but that benefits will arise mainly from an increasing assimilation, where appropriate, of this into their core activities of teaching and research rather than vice-versa. Many institutions, and academics, remain rightly wary of going too far down the route of 'employer-focussed' activity if there is a sense that it may take them away from their role as an impartial education provider that develops people for their life and careers - wherever that may take them.

The current debate about HE-EE is an entree to a much larger debate about the role and purpose of HE in society. These are not easy questions to answer and may evoke a wide range of views and responses[43]. They are important questions to consider, however, and through dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders it may become possible to enhance the profile and relevance of the HE sector to society as a whole. Commercial businesses are clearly an essential group to engage in these discussions but they are not the only one. Inputs are also required from the public and non-profit sectors, from learners and the communities in which they reside, from policy makers, and from the academics and other professionals who work within or alongside the HE

41. The management scholar Henry Mintzberg has described this as 'emergent strategy'. See, for example: Mintzberg, H. (1994) The rise and fall of strategic planning, Harvard Business Review, January-February.

42. The recent BIS (2009) report appears to have begun to redress this situation and espouses a broader view of EE in HE.

43. See a recent article from the Independent on 'What are universities for?' for a range of different perspectives: http://tinyurl.com/yj59dy4.

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sector. HEIs clearly have a responsibility to meet the needs of their constituents but this will require difficult decisions about how to use their finite resources, as illustrated in the following quote from the Work Foundation:

> *"Universities, at the heart of the UK's growing knowledge economy, are facing unprecedented challenges. Tasked not only with educating students, whose expectations of education is changing, and with producing cutting-edge internationally recognised research, universities are also being asked to work with local communities and collaborate with businesses. Yet these are significant calls on finite resources and questions need to be raised about how universities and their leaders can best respond to the challenges they are now facing."*[44]

To reiterate a point made in our previous report, for universities and employers to truly collaborate, deep running reciprocal relationships are required:

> *"The key to successful partnerships is developing a relationship based on mutual respect and understanding. To use the analogy from the Native American proverb "never judge a man until you walk a mile in his moccasins", universities, employers and other organisations/bodies with an interest in the development of a high-skills economy must take time to get to know one another – to develop an appreciation of the unique contribution of (and pressures on) each partner and what each partner could do to facilitate better working relations."*[45]

Such understanding is dependent on finding opportunities for discussion, reflection and the sharing of experience within and between stakeholders. Whilst it would seem that in the current climate a huge amount of effort is being directed towards making universities adapt and respond more effectively to the demands of employers (largely through government-controlled incentives and penalties) far less attention is given to encouraging employers to seriously consider the social and ethical (as well as commercial) imperatives to develop and support their employees. Culture change cuts both ways, as does genuine collaboration.

If the 'credit crunch' and subsequent recession have taught us anything it's that all our futures are linked – that abusive and self-serving practices within one part of society have a knock-on effect across the whole system. It is true perhaps, that at times the HE sector can seem rather inward-looking, risk averse and/or elitist, but similar criticisms can be targeted elsewhere. The next few years will be key in determining the future direction of our universities and their ability to deliver the kinds of contribution expected of them. As institutions with roots that lead right to the heart of our societies (in terms of the arts, science, education, etc.) their future is of significance to all of us and their success dependent on developing a shared and sustainable understanding of their place within society – neither ivory towers nor skills factories!

44. Work Foundation (2008) The Work Foundation and Higher Education. London: Work Foundation, p1.
45. Bolden, Connor, Duquemin, Hirsh and Petrov (2009), p43.

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9. Table of abbreviations

ACCA	Association of Certified Chartered Accountants
ASN	Additional Student Number
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CIHE	Council for Industry and Higher Education
CIM	Chartered Institute of Management
CIPD	Chartered Institute for Personnel Development
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CV	Curriculum Vitae
DVC	Deputy Vice Chancellor
ECIF	Economic Challenge Investment Fund
EE	Employer Engagement
ESF	European Social Fund
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FD	Foundation Degree
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEIF	Higher Education Innovation Fund
HLSP	Higher Level Skills Pathfinder
ILM	Institute of Leadership and Management
IOD	Institute of Directors
IT	Information Technology
L&D	Learning and Development
LFHE	Leadership Foundation for Higher Education
LLN	Lifelong Learning Network
KT	Knowledge Transfer

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KTP	Knowledge Transfer Partnership
NHS	National Health Service
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
PG	Postgraduate
PT	Part-time
PVC	Pro-Vice Chancellor
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
RDA	Regional Development Agency
REF	Research Excellence Framework
SDF	Strategic Development Fund
SME	Small and Medium Sized Enterprise
UG	Undergraduate
UK	United Kingdom
USP	Unique Selling Proposition
VC	Vice Chancellor
WBL	Work-Based Learning
WFD	Workforce Development

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