



Employer Engagement

Emerging Practice from QAA Reviews

Report

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About this report

This report provides an overview of emerging practice in relation to the engagement that takes place between higher education providers¹ and employers² (**employer engagement**) in order to support UK higher education providers in enhancing their practice. It is based upon an analysis of published reports arising from reviews by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) undertaken since September 2010. QAA has a strategic aim of widening employer engagement with quality assurance and the enhancement of learning.

QAA recognises the centrality of employer engagement in the design and delivery of the curriculum, enhancing student employability and responding to local demand for skills. We work to 'involve and empower employers, higher education students and graduates in the process of shaping the national employability agenda in higher education'. In order to achieve this, we seek to 'build an understanding and collaboration between higher education and business sectors.'³

In order to further enhance the existing evidence base on engagement between employers and higher education providers, we have commissioned a series of projects. This initial analysis seeks to provide an evidence base to inform discussions between QAA and the higher education and business sectors, through exploring the nature and characteristics of current engagement, as derived from our existing sources.

This report looks at a range of practices that we have identified, through an analysis of over 200 individual review reports and a sample of self-evaluation documents submitted by providers for their review, as demonstrating active and productive engagement between employers and higher education providers. It provides an overview that will be useful to the wider higher education sector in future planning of the student experience.⁴

1 The term higher education provider is used to mean organisations that deliver higher education. In the UK they may be a degree-awarding body or another organisation that offers programmes of higher education on behalf of degree-awarding bodies.

2 The term employers is used throughout this report to refer to businesses, industry, employers and their representatives.

3 *Employer Engagement at QAA*: www.qaa.ac.uk/partners/employers/employer-engagement-at-qa

4 *The Higher Education - Business and Community Interaction Survey* (HEFCE 2014) is the main vehicle for measuring the volume and direction of interactions between UK higher education providers and the business and wider communities. The survey for the 2012-13 academic year shows that there is a continuing increase in knowledge exchange between providers and the public, private and third sectors. There had been a growth of four per cent on the previous academic year, and the overall increase since 2003-04 was 45 per cent.

About employer engagement

Engagement between higher education providers and employers has become increasingly commonplace within UK higher education. Stimulated by demand for skills, and through policy initiatives associated with *Higher Ambitions* (BIS, 2009), the Leitch Report (2006) and the introduction of the vocationally relevant foundation degrees in 2002-03, there has been a noticeable growth in the interactions between institutions and employers.

Such engagement can take a variety of forms, but typically focuses upon:

- enhancing student employability, through creating a suitably skilled graduate population, in response to the demands of the economy
- creating opportunities for the development of the workforce, through access to skills development opportunities
- creating opportunities for higher education providers to offer research and consultancy services to businesses, typically as part of collaborative and partnership arrangements associated with enterprise and innovation initiatives.

As one of our strategic priorities, employer engagement is supported through our Knowledgebases⁵, case studies⁶ and Enhancement Themes⁷ work. In 2010 we undertook research across UK higher education providers in which we concluded that:

Employer engagement is an area of increasing importance to the strategic development of higher education institutions. The skills required of the future workforce and the predicted demographic changes are encouraging institutions to become more flexible in the types of learner they recruit, the range of learning opportunities they make available and the modes of study they offer.⁸

This report provides an analysis of current practice to assist higher education providers as they increasingly focus on developing effective employer engagement activities.

5 www.qaa.ac.uk/improving-higher-education/knowledgebase-search

6 These case studies are included in the Good Practice Knowledgebase.

7 www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk

8 www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Employer-responsive-provision-survey---a-reflective-report.pdf

Executive summary

There are clear and explicit links between employer engagement, the enhancement of teaching and learning, and students' employability. Engagement with employers, as part of the design and delivery of the curriculum, is considered central to enhancing and supporting student employability and workforce development, through the creation of graduates with the appropriate skills, knowledge and expertise required by employers.

Input from industry and employers is central to ensuring not only that providers are delivering programmes to meet needs and demand but also that higher education programmes remain relevant, valid and current.

Providers' aims regarding employer engagement

Three common themes emerge in respect of providers' intentions in relation to their engagement with employers:

- enhancing students' employability through embedding practical and vocationally relevant skills within the curriculum
- supporting the skills development of the local workforce through access to vocationally relevant training and development opportunities
- providing employer with access to research, consultancy and innovation services and training, as part of collaboration, partnership, enterprise, and innovation activities and knowledge transfer.⁹

Practices associated with employer engagement

In the main, examples of good practice related to the following activities (see Appendix 1):

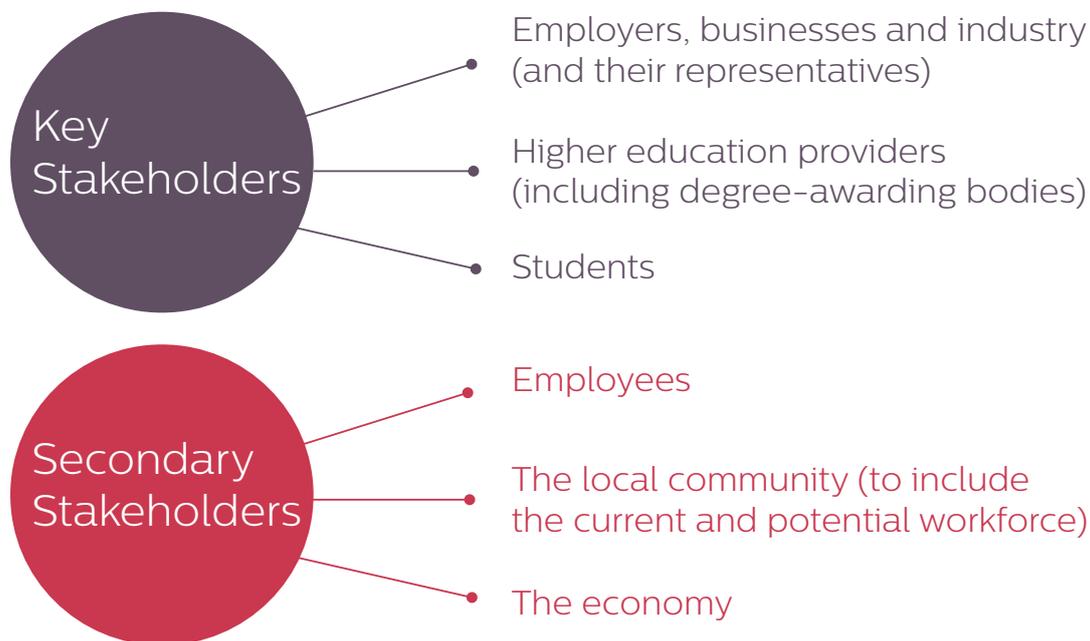
- links with employers in informing curriculum development, in order to ensure relevance, validity and currency of the programme
- the embedding of employability within the curriculum, through the development of relevant skills, knowledge and work-relevant learning and assessment
- the role of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) in embedding academic and professional standards within the curriculum as part of approval and validation processes, and their input into review and monitoring arrangements
- opportunities for work-based learning and/or work placements, supported by real-life projects and assessments
- employer involvement with the provision of careers advice and guidance
- information made available to students and employers, clarifying arrangements, roles and expectations - typically in the form of handbooks and web-based information
- productive relationships with employers, designed to enhance and support student employability.

In respect of the design and delivery of the curriculum, employer engagement was most evident in the context of foundation degrees. This is a direct result of their explicit intention of linking academic and vocational learning through close collaboration with employers.

⁹ Knowledge transfer: The process of using the results or outcomes of higher education research activities to benefit the wider society and economy.

Active participants in employer engagement

The graphic shows the key stakeholders/beneficiaries of employer engagement, who are active participants in what is essentially a tripartite relationship.

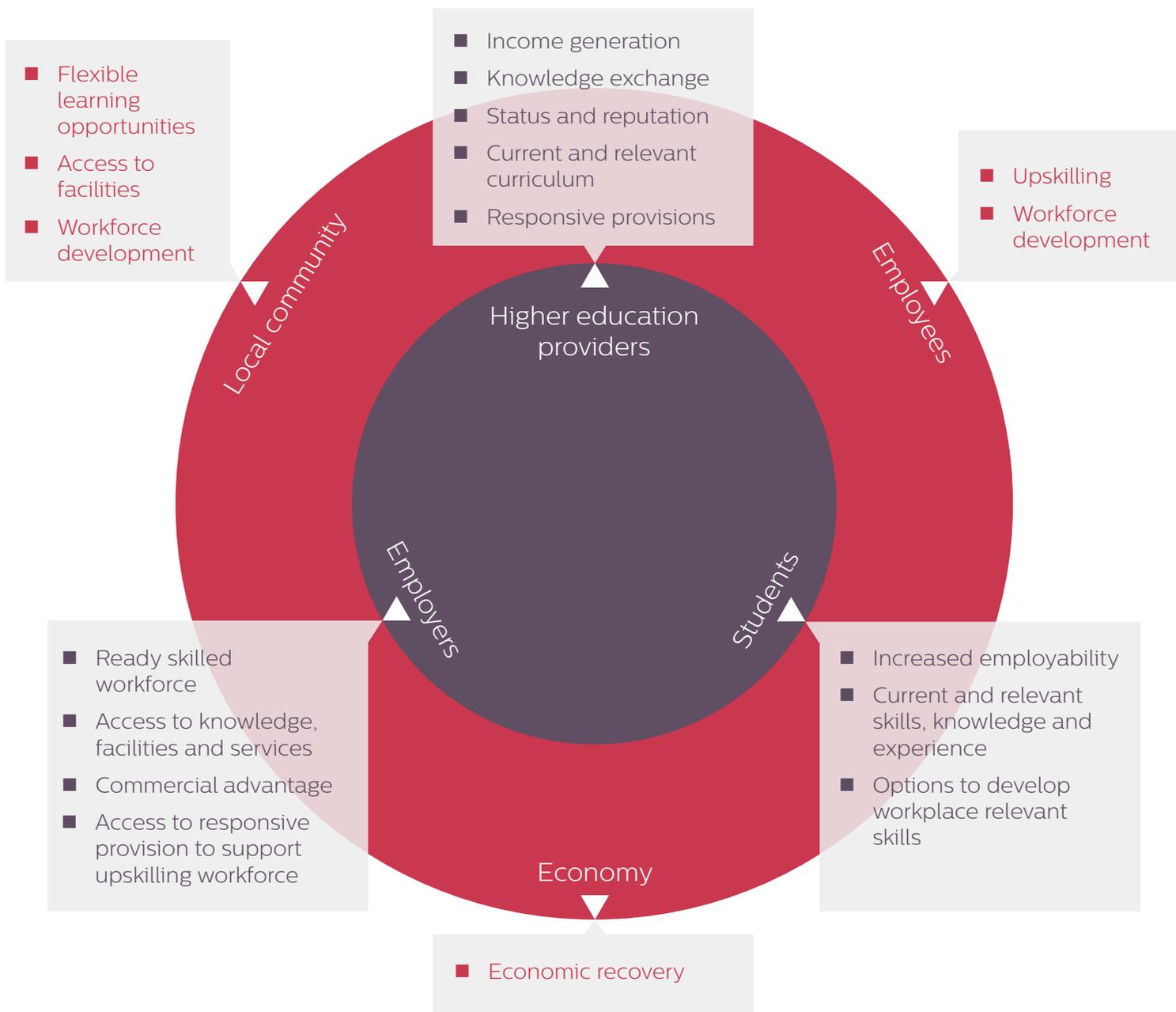


Benefits of employer engagement

The main **benefits** to result from engagement between employers and higher education providers (see Appendix 2) include:

- the enhancement of student employability through the opportunity to gain industry/work-relevant skills, experience and knowledge, and in some cases professional qualifications and accreditation, as part of programmes of study
- The creation of 'work-ready' graduates for employers, equipped with the skills, knowledge and experience required for the workplace
- workforce development, providing the current and potential workforce with opportunities for developing their skills through a variety of high-quality flexible study opportunities, delivered in response to need and demand
- the opportunity for research, collaboration and consultancy, and access to services and facilities, as part of income generation and knowledge transfer.

Additional benefits afforded by such engagement between employers and higher education providers included supporting the local economy and aiding wider economic recovery.



Employer engagement and foundation degrees

Evidence from QAA's review of foundation degrees¹⁰ concluded that a partnership based approach, involving employers, providers and Sector Skills Councils, has been central to the currency and curriculum relevance of foundation degrees. However, it was recommended that providers should continue to explore the ways in which employers can become more involved in the cycle of programme development.

Foundation degrees have had an impact on the approach to, and mechanisms for, employer engagement, in respect of the design and delivery of the curriculum and enhancing student employability.

¹⁰ QAA (2005) *Learning from Reviews of Foundation Degrees in England carried out in 2004-05*
 QAA (2009) *Information Bulletin: Foundation Degree Forward Endorsement Service*
 QAA (2013) *Report on the Review of Foundation Degrees in Wales 2012-13*, available at:
www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Report-Review-Foundation-Degrees-Wales-2012-13.pdf

Suggested ways forward

Although there were many examples of effective practice identified in relation to the interaction between providers and employers, in support of the development and delivery of the curriculum, areas for improvement were also identified (see Appendix 3).

In the main, suggested improvements focused upon:

- taking a strategic approach to employer engagement and ensuring that the mechanisms are effective and sustainable over time, with a consistent and coordinated approach across the institution
- encouraging greater participation from employers in approval, validation, review and monitoring processes, by means of opportunities to provide feedback and/or formal membership of relevant committees and boards
- ensuring greater consistency in the approach, volume and quality of input from employers in the development and design of curricula, across programmes
- sharing good practice throughout the institution, to support employer engagement in curriculum design and delivery
- creating opportunities, where appropriate, for practitioners and professionals to provide an input into the delivery of the curriculum, embedding vocational relevance and knowledge
- creating opportunities for staff to maintain current industry knowledge and experience
- providing equality of access to work-based and placement opportunities
- ensuring that plans for work-based learning support the enhancement of learning opportunities and employability
- encouraging employers to contribute to the design of, and participate in, work-related assessments, and provide feedback to students to support achievement and attainment
- providing clear information for employers, clarifying expectations, roles and responsibilities and the mechanisms for, and benefits of, engagement
- monitoring the impact and effectiveness of employer engagement strategies and plans, informed by the collection and interpretation of meaningful information.

Methodology

In order to identify examples of employer engagement in higher education, evidence has been drawn from a number of sources. These include our published reports for reviews undertaken since September 2010 in higher education institutions and further education colleges delivering higher education. In addition, a sample of published reports from the ‘educational oversight’ reviews of alternative providers have also been included. In order to help identify examples of practice, a sample of 13 self-evaluations submitted by higher education providers, in support of their reviews, were also included within the research.

Although our Knowledgebase and case studies¹¹ provide valuable sources of information about emerging features of good practice and areas of recommendation, in respect of employer engagement, evidence from the published review reports and self-evaluation documents provides an additional layer of examples of practice.

When considering what we know from our reviews about the extent and characteristics of engagement between employers and higher education providers, it is useful to note that the review methods and resulting reports were not designed to directly capture such information. Thus there is variation between methods in respect of the nature and extent of information presented pertaining to such engagement, but potentially also between individual reviews within the same method.

It is important to remember that although reference is not always made to employer engagement in every review report, this does not mean that such practice is not taking place. A review of information derived from providers’ self-evaluation documents, of information published on their websites, supplements the findings of the review reports themselves, revealing that while there is evidence of practice in providers’ information sets, this has not necessarily been captured through our formal reviews.

It is also useful to note that work undertaken by QAA Scotland as part of the Enhancement Themes programme provides an additional source of information about employer engagement in the design and delivery of the curriculum,¹² and in respect of student employability.¹³

11 See notes 5 and 6.

12 www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/toolkits/flexible-curriculum/1-external-engagement-and-partnerships/1-1-engage-employers-with-design-and-delivery

13 www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/enhancement-themes/completed-enhancement-themes/employability

Employer engagement and foundation degrees

Employer engagement and partnership-based approaches to the design and the delivery of the curriculum is part of the defining characteristic of foundation degrees. Foundation degrees, first introduced in 2002–3, were designed to integrate academic and vocational learning through close collaboration between employers and higher education providers. They were intended to equip learners with the skills and knowledge relevant to their employment, so satisfying the needs of employers and employees.

In their design, input from employers, and sector and professional bodies was integral, as they were designed to meet the needs of employers and local employment markets. Where foundation degrees were more specialised, markets were further extended geographically, and flexible modes of delivery made available, benefiting from the opportunities afforded by flexible, distance and distributed modes of delivery.

Foundation Degrees explicitly linked learning and work, providing students with both work-based learning opportunities, and the knowledge and transferable skills required. They were intended to provide students with the skills, knowledge and understanding that employers need.

In order to ensure the vocational relevance of foundation degrees and the effective integration of academic and vocational learning, the qualification Benchmark Statement¹⁴ clearly articulates the expectation that employers should be fully involved in the design and review of foundation degrees, and where possible, assessment and delivery. By doing so, it was considered that such provision would be relevant, valid and responsive to the needs of both learners and employers.

Evidence from QAA's review of foundation degrees¹⁵ concluded that a partnership based approach, involving employers, providers and Sector Skills Councils, has been central to the currency and curriculum relevance of foundation degrees. However, it was recommended that providers should continue to explore the ways in which employers can become more involved in the cycle of programme development.

Foundation degrees have had an impact on the approach to, and mechanisms for, employer engagement, in respect of the design and delivery of the curriculum and enhancing student employability.

14 QAA (2010) *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Foundation-degree-qualification-benchmark-2010.pdf

15 QAA (2005) *Learning from Reviews of Foundation Degrees in England carried out in 2004-2005*
QAA (2009) *Information Bulletin: Foundation Degree Forward Endorsement Service*
QAA (2013) *Report on the Review of Foundation Degrees in Wales 2012-2013*
www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Report-Review-Foundation-Degrees-Wales-2012-13.pdf

Employer engagement in practice

Our analysis shows that there is great diversity in the opportunities for engagement between employers and higher education providers. Some key examples are listed in the box. (Note that all examples in this section are illustrative. They do not represent an exhaustive list.)

Opportunities for engagement

Identification of demand and needs (skills and knowledge)

Design of the curriculum

Programme approval and validation

Review and monitoring

Contribution to the development of assessment briefs

Feedback on proposals for course development

Feedback on student work

Contributing to the delivery of teaching and learning

Work-based and work-related learning opportunities

Mentoring

Careers advice and guidance

Design and evaluation of assessment methods

Sponsorship of students

Placements and internships

Entrepreneurship opportunities

Research, innovation and knowledge exchange

Internships, work experience and volunteering opportunities

The strategic approach

The majority of providers had clear and explicit strategic approaches for engagement with employers, with such activities included in their strategic priorities. Approaches were embedded within strategies associated with student employability, research, collaboration and enterprise, and employer engagement.

Motivations for engagement

Supporting the education and training needs of the region

Supporting economic regeneration and success

Providing flexible, innovative and responsive training/education

Serving individuals, communities and employers

Facilitating and promoting knowledge transfer

Enhancing student employability

Being the provider of choice for:

- employer engagement
- workforce development
- research and knowledge transfer

Enhancing teaching and learning

Supporting enterprise and innovation

Supporting workforce development

The centrality of employer engagement and employability to strategies and plans was cited as a fairly recent development for many providers, and identified as a major change since their previous QAA review. A need, however, was identified to ensure a consistent strategic approach, and the sustainability longer term.

Aims of engagement: examples

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICHESTER¹⁶

The University uses employer engagement ‘...to support development, enterprise and innovation in the local community, enhance workforce skills by providing access to facilities, knowledge and research.’

BLACKBURN COLLEGE¹⁷

The University uses employer engagement ‘To provide a range of learning opportunities, services and support relevant to the needs of individuals and employers...which helps to raise the skills of the nation, giving employers and individuals the skills they need to improve productivity, employability and social cohesion.’

16 www.chi.ac.uk/about-us/who-we-are/professional-services/research-employer-engagement-office-reeo

17 www.blackburn.ac.uk/media/2365/employer_engagement_policy.pdf

Engagement strategies: examples

BASINGSTOKE COLLEGE¹⁸

The College's vision is 'To be the provider of choice for employer engagement and workforce development training.' The College's **Employer Engagement Strategy** states:

'We will work with employers in the region and the local community to:

- 'equip businesses and employees with the skills, knowledge and qualifications that they need to remain competitive and ensure future sustainability
- 'provide support and guidance to help young people progress to employment
- 'develop those already in employment to progress their careers and meet their aspirations.'

BIRMINGHAM CITY UNIVERSITY¹⁹

'The University's Employer Engagement Strategy demonstrates its ongoing commitment to student employability, aspiration and achievement by working closely with local, regional and national employers. As a practice-led institution, our links with industry have always been strong, but as the economic climate continues to evolve, our challenge to deliver employer-valued provision increases.'

Student employability: examples

THE UNIVERSITY OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE²⁰

The University considers employer engagement '...to be part of employability as it is directly related to students' learning and their preparedness for professional life or civic activity after graduating.'

THE UNIVERSITY OF KENT²¹

'University of Kent is committed to enhancing the employability of all our students [...] in order to enable them to compete and flourish in a competitive fast-moving knowledge-based economy.'

18 www.bcot.ac.uk/media/1915781/employer_engagement_strategy.pdf

19 www.bcu.ac.uk/about-us/celt/academic-staff-development/employer-engagement

20 <http://insight-dev.glos.ac.uk/departments/degreeplus/careers/staff/Pages/EmployerEngagementCaseStudies.aspx>

21 www.kent.ac.uk/employability

Enhancing employability

It is clear that the concept of enhancing student employability is central to the design and delivery of the curriculum, and that employability is further enhanced through active links with employers. The interaction between employers and providers in the design and delivery of the curriculum, and through careers advice and guidance, was considered to provide students with the skills, experience and knowledge required for employment, and provide employers with work-ready graduates, so enhancing their employability.

The strategic approach: examples of practice

BELFAST METROPOLITAN COLLEGE

The College puts strong emphasis on employer engagement and vocational learning, and provides an excellent range of enhancement activities to increase employability skills in line with its strategic objectives.

EXETER COLLEGE (EXETER)

Employers work with tutors to develop work-based learning opportunities that promote employability and build on learning within the higher education programmes.

Extensive examples of practice were identified in respect of employer engagement, explicitly considered as contributing to the enhancement of student employability. Three primary points for engagement were identified in relation to student employability:

- the development and design of the curriculum
- the delivery of teaching, learning and assessment
- careers guidance and advice.

The coordination of employer engagement

Evidence emerged to demonstrate a dualistic approach to the management and resourcing of employer engagement, with both centralised and devolved structures evident. Centralised structures were associated primarily with: student employability; careers guidance; and research, enterprise and collaboration activities. In contrast, devolved structures appear to have developed at the school or programme level in response to specific programme developments, for example foundation degrees, and the associated networks and contacts of programme staff.

How engagement takes place

Interactions between employers and providers take a number of forms. These typically include:

- requests for research, consultancy, collaboration and enterprise activities
- strategic partnerships and consortiums
- advisory boards and forums
- programme-level staff networks and contacts (often informal in their origin)
- requests for bespoke courses and/or employer-responsive provision
- careers and guidance activities
- sharing opportunities (job vacancies, internships and placements)

- employer or business representation on the board of governors
- engagement with professional, occupational or sector bodies
- formal membership of approval and validation panels
- ad hoc enquiries and discussions, often via existing contacts and networks or dedicated points of contact.

In terms of scale, there was notable variation in the number of employers that providers engaged with, and the nature of such engagement. As an example, within their review report, one institution alone was cited as having links with over 7,000 employers, although the specific nature of the links was not described. In another instance, a college was identified as having over 400 links with employers.

Evidence from the 2013-14 *Higher Education - Business and Community Interaction Survey* (HE-BCI),²² which provides information on the income generated through interaction between UK higher education providers and businesses, found that 8,095 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff were employed in a dedicated business and community role, embedded across the providers in a variety of roles, to include research contracts or careers advice. These roles were found to be diverse in type and location.

Identifying demand and opportunities

As part of engagement with employers, providers have sought to identify emerging demand, opportunities and skills gaps, in relation to the local economy. By identifying such demand, providers have responded to emerging needs. Providers employ a variety of methods for identifying demand, typically involving a desk-based analysis of existing market intelligence, combined with direct interactions with employers.

Approaches to identifying local needs and demand include:

- review of local labour market data
- market research
- competitor analysis
- collection and analysis of market intelligence
- student employability data
- enquiries from businesses, industry and employers
- discussions with employers and representatives from business and industry
- feedback from employers
- current industrial/professional expertise and knowledge of staff.

Not only do discussions with employers identify opportunities for the development of new courses where there is sufficient demand but also, conversely, such engagement provides information to inform course closure where demand falls.

Curriculum development and design

Employer input into the design of the curriculum was considered to ensure the relevance, validity and currency of the programme. Likewise, the embedding of industry skills and experience within the curriculum was considered to enhance student employability and provide locally required graduate skills and attributes. Where there was a strong vocational or professional element to the programme, then input from employers and practitioners was more evident.

²² HEFCE (2014) *Higher Education - Business and Community Interaction Survey 2012-13* (HEFCE 2014/10) available at: www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2014/201410/HEFCE2014_10.pdf

Central to the development of industry-led curricula was the requirement for them to be relevant and of a sufficiently high quality. The development of professional attributes was integral to the curriculum development process, as industry input into the curriculum helps prepare students for professional practice. For example, foundation degrees require industry input as a requirement of design and approval. Where employer input into approval and/or validation took place, this was typically through providing feedback on proposals or through panel membership.

Examples of practice included:

- industry input into identifying demands and needs, informing the development of programmes that address specific skills, knowledge and expertise needs, and/or closure of those that do not
- the contribution of employers to the design of programmes in order to ensure that programmes:
 - are relevant, valid and current
 - develop appropriate skills, knowledge and expertise
 - provide access to work-relevant tasks and assessment
 - provide access to industry standard resources
 - provide access to workplace learning
 - provide input by industry professionals or others with relevant professional expertise.
- The role of PSRBs in embedding academic and professional standards within the curriculum as part of approval and validation processes, and their input into review and monitoring arrangements.

Industry-led curricula: examples of practice

ROYAL CENTRAL SCHOOL SPEECH AND DRAMA

An industry specialist is involved in validation, and employers attend dedicated events to advise staff and students.

UNIVERSITY OF SALFORD

Employers contribute to the development of new programmes.

BIRMINGHAM CITY

Consistent with the University's commitment to employability and to practice-based learning, approval and re-approval panels are required to include at least one member with relevant experience of industry, commerce, public service or the professions.

While there was evidence of employers being involved in programme design, through providing feedback on proposals and through approving and validating programmes, there was less evidence of employers being involved in formal processes.

Professional and occupational standards were incorporated into programmes through input from professional, occupational and sector bodies, typically as part of approval and validation processes. For some awards, for example, foundation degrees and those with a formal 'accreditation', external input into approval and validation processes was a requirement.

Professional standards: examples of practice

BATH SPA UNIVERSITY

The University seeks employer involvement in the design and the approval stage, and in the provision of learning opportunities where live briefs are active.

BIRMINGHAM CITY UNIVERSITY

The University believes that the use of practitioners as external examiners helps to ensure the relevance of programmes to professions and employers.

UNIVERSITY OF WORCESTER

The University showed that within the curriculum, both in the Institute of Health and Society and in the Institute of Education, employability is embedded in the programmes, with employers appointed to validation panels. For other programmes, institutes work with employers for placements.

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE BIRMINGHAM

For validation and approval, industrial input is mandatory and is provided at an early stage by the relevant industrial liaison committee.

YORK COLLEGE

The college reported direct involvement of employers at the validation stage.

SOUTH WEST COLLEGE (NORTHERN IRELAND)

The college demonstrated a responsive and specialised curriculum, informed and supported by employers, as well as industry-related development opportunities for staff.

Delivery of teaching and learning

Employer engagement in the delivery of teaching and learning, and supporting student achievement and attainment, was considered to directly enhance student employability. Examples of practice were in seven main forms:

- the opportunity for students to undertake workplace learning
- the opportunity for students to undertake work-related tasks and/or real-life projects and assessments
- teaching enhanced through visiting lecturers from industry, guest lectures and masterclasses with employers and professionals
- teaching staff having recent and ongoing professional/industry experience
- students having access to industry standard learning resources
- input from employers as mentors and assessors, and through providing feedback on student work and progress
- careers advice and guidance.

Industry input into teaching: examples of practice

THE UNIVERSITY OF WEST LONDON

The University uses current practitioners to teach parts of the programme.

BATH SPA UNIVERSITY

The University involves employers in the provision of learning opportunities where live briefs are active.

BOURNEMOUTH AND POOLE COLLEGE

The College was considered to demonstrate good practice in the provision and management of specialist industry standard learning resources in computer generated imagery, engineering, digital design, music, and radio production.

Colleges, alternative providers and specialist institutions made repeated reference to the importance of staff having current or recent professional or industry-related experience. Recent industry experience was considered to be an important part of staff development, and directly contributed to the currency and relevance of the curriculum. Experience was achieved in three main ways:

- ongoing professional practice (for example, within the creative industries)
- part-time employment (academic-industrial)
- research and collaboration activities with industry (more typical of universities).

Staff professional experience: examples of good practice

LONDON FILM ACADEMY

Teaching staff are all actively engaged in the industry and contribute to the content of all programmes.

CITY AND GUILDS LONDON ART SCHOOL

There is consistent emphasis in the curriculum on current professional practice underpinned by strong industry links and experienced practitioner staff.

MANCHESTER COLLEGE

There are considerable opportunities for staff development and engagement with employers, which enable staff to maintain currency and professional standards.

There were also examples of professional research being a feature of both postgraduate and undergraduate programmes.

Some providers offered short or bespoke courses on a flexible basis to help learners undertake work-based learning. These courses were typically out of the scope of reviews and were rarely mentioned in review reports, but they were mentioned by providers in their strategies and documents.

Work-based learning

Workplace/placement learning opportunities were considered to contribute to the embedding of employability within the curriculum, enhancing student employability through real-world experience.

It was apparent that a variety of approaches existed in respect of the creation and management of work-based and placement opportunities:

- student-led, where students identify and arrange their own placements
- programme-led, where opportunities are arranged and managed at programme level
- provider-led, where opportunities are arranged, managed and coordinated by a central team.

Work-based learning: examples of practice

WILTSHIRE COLLEGE

Work-based learning in many programmes, and the active involvement of employers, promote the quality of learning and support the overall purposes of foundation degrees.

TECH MUSIC SCHOOLS LTD

External stakeholders and industry practitioners make valued contributions to ensuring that the curriculum is up-to-date and relevant.

While opportunities for work-based or placement learning were commonplace across providers, there could be greater consistency and equality across programmes and between institutions. As expected, opportunities for work-based and placement learning were more common for foundation degrees and vocationally and professionally relevant programmes.

Assessment

Although there was evidence of employer involvement in assessment, typically where the assessment was work-related, this was not commonplace. Examples were cited where the employer had been involved in the design of the work-related projects and assessment. The workplace relevance of assessments was considered to further enhance student employability.

Where it existed, employer involvement in assessment was more common for formative than summative assessment. There could be benefits in involving employers more closely in setting assessments and providing feedback.

Employer involvement in assessment: example of practice

BLACKPOOL AND THE FLYDE COLLEGE

The variety of assessment tasks and their relevance to the world of work was valued by students and employers.

Careers advice and guidance

Common examples of practice in supporting and enhancing student employability as part of careers advice and guidance include:

- work placements
- site visits
- guest lectures
- employer input at job fairs
- mock interviews.

Further support for students in achieving graduate employment was provided through jobs boards, where employers were encouraged to post vacancies for jobs, placements, internships and/or volunteering opportunities.

Employer involvement in careers guidance: examples of practice

SOUTHAMPTON SOLENT UNIVERSITY

Students work on freelance contracts for local businesses, which gives them real-world experience and raises the institution's reputation.

SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY

The University's reputation in relation to employability and its links with employers are key factors in students choosing to study at Sheffield Hallam. Employability was recognised as a priority within the University, and innovative practice in promoting it was well established both internally and externally.

CITY COLLEGE BRIGHTON AND HOVE

The College has a highly effective learning and teaching strategy that develops students' employability.

RAVENSBOURNE

Ravensbourne fosters close relations with industry, which both influence its culture and support its preparation of students for obtaining, and succeeding in, graduate employment.

THE UNIVERSITY FOR THE CREATIVE ARTS

Employability is embedded within the curriculum, and a range of opportunities are provided by the University to enhance the employability of its students.

Information

Examples of effective practice were noted in respect of the provision of information for employers. Information was primarily made available via the website, handbooks and supporting information.

In some cases, bespoke handbooks and guidance materials were produced for employers in relation to the provision of work-based learning and placements. Such information typically set out the role and expectations of employers (and students), in relation to the placement and any associated assessment.

As part of curriculum design, approval and validation, and – less commonly – reviews, employers were often provided with programme specifications and invited to provide feedback, so ensuring the currency and relevance of the curriculum.

However, while examples of good practice were identified, the provision of information for employers was also cited as an area for further improvement.

Monitoring and review

PSRBs were identified as actively involved in programme-level review and monitoring. In contrast, however, employer involvement was limited. It was suggested that greater consideration could be given to the arrangements and opportunities for employers to feed back on student performance and provide input into review and monitoring processes. While opportunities were readily in place for feedback from PSRBs, such arrangements were not as well established for employers.

Other engagement

The primary limitation of this analysis is its focus on information derived from QAA review activities. The analysis therefore makes little reference to engagement with employers through:

- collaborations and consultancy as part of research and enterprise initiatives
- delivery of higher education programmes (in full or in part) within the workplace
- bespoke employer-responsive provision in the form of closed courses that have been developed to meet the needs of specific employers
- privately funded skills development courses offered by providers to the community – for example, leadership and management courses
- sponsorship arrangements
- the use businesses and employers make of the facilities and resources offered by higher education providers.

Just as this list is not exhaustive, neither are the conclusions of this report. Nevertheless, in providing an overview of the nature and characteristics of engagement between higher education providers and employers, industry, professional bodies and other higher education and occupational bodies, it provides a picture of the current level and nature of employer engagement at UK higher education providers.

The scale and importance of interaction between higher education providers and the wider community is significant, although not discernible from QAA review activities. The 2012-13 Higher Education Business and Community Interaction Survey, found that income generated through business and community activity totalled £3,570 million for the UK.

Suggested ways forward

Although there were many examples of effective practice identified in relation to the interaction between providers and employers, in support of the development and delivery of the curriculum, areas for improvement were also identified (see Appendix 3).

In the main, suggested improvements focused upon:

- taking a strategic approach to employer engagement and ensuring that the mechanisms are effective and sustainable over time, with a consistent and coordinated approach across the institution
- encouraging greater participation from employers in approval, validation, review and monitoring processes, by means of opportunities to provide feedback and/or formal membership of relevant committees and boards
- ensuring greater consistency in the approach, volume and quality of input from employers in the development and design of curricula, across programmes
- sharing good practice throughout the institution, to support employer engagement in curriculum design and delivery
- creating opportunities, where appropriate, for practitioners and professionals to provide an input into the delivery of the curriculum, embedding vocational relevance and knowledge
- creating opportunities for staff to maintain current industry knowledge and experience
- providing equality of access to work-based and placement opportunities
- ensuring that plans for work-based learning support the enhancement of learning opportunities and employability
- encouraging employers to contribute to the design of, and participate in, work-related assessments, and provide feedback to students to support achievement and attainment
- providing clear information for employers, clarifying expectations, roles and responsibilities and the mechanisms for, and benefits of, engagement
- monitoring the impact and effectiveness of employer engagement strategies and plans, informed by the collection and interpretation of meaningful information.

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Resources

We have published the following guidance to assist UK higher education providers in embedding skills for employability across their higher education programmes:

QAA (2012) *Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Education: Guidance for UK Higher Education Providers*

www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=70

For further guidance on embedding future-facing employability skills in higher education curricula see:

QAA (2014) *Education for Sustainable Development: Guidance for UK higher Education Providers*

www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=533

Appendix 1: Examples of effective practice

Strategic approaches

- Employer engagement as part of vision, mission, strategic priorities and goals
- Employer engagement strategy
- Employability strategy
- Research, enterprise and collaboration strategies

Themes

- Enhanced student employability
- Workforce development and skills for business
- Research and knowledge exchange
- Income generation
- Economic regeneration and success

Links with employers

- The productive relationships with employers designed to enhance and support student employability

Mechanisms

- Forums and advisory committees
- Contribution as member of provider's governing body
- Programme-level networks and contacts
- Ad hoc enquiries and discussions
- Strategic partnerships

Identifying demand

- Review of local labour market data
- Market research
- Competitor analysis
- Collection and analysis of market intelligence
- Student employability data
- Enquiries from businesses, industry and employers
- Discussions with employers and representatives from business and industry
- Feedback from employers
- Current industrial/professional expertise and knowledge of staff

Management of quality and standards

Employer involvement in approval and validation (ad hoc or as a requirement)

Embedding of occupational, accrediting and sector standards into the curriculum, through the stages of design, approval and validation

The role of PSRBs in embedding academic and professional standards within the curriculum as part of approval, validation processes, and their input into review and monitoring arrangements

Curriculum design

Industry input into identifying demands and needs, informing the development of programmes that address specific skills, knowledge and expertise needs, and/or closure of those that don't

Links with employers in informing curriculum development, ensuring relevance and currency of the programme

The contribution of employers to programme design, in order to ensure that programmes:

- are relevant, valid and current
- develop appropriate skills, knowledge and expertise
- provide access to work-relevant tasks and assessment
- provide access to industry standard resources
- provide access to workplace learning
- provide input by industry professionals or others with relevant professional expertise

Curriculum delivery

The opportunity for workplace learning

Contribution to delivery, through visiting lecturers from industry, guest lectures and master classes

Recent and ongoing professional and/or industry practice experience of teaching staff

Access to industry standard resources

The opportunity to undertake work-related tasks, projects and assessments

Input from employers as mentors and assessors, providing feedback on student work and progress

Careers advice and guidance

Integration of collaborative research in research degrees, and the embedding of research in teaching and learning

Assessment

The embedding of employability within the curriculum, through the development of relevant skills, knowledge and work-relevant learning and assessment

Contribution of employers to the development of work-related (real-world) assessments and projects

Employer involvement in the design of assessments

Employer involvement in work-place assessment (typically formative assessment)

Employer involvement in assessing students and providing feedback on achievement

Information

Information on the provider's website

Handbooks and guidance describing roles and expectations in respect of work-based learning and assessments

Careers advice and guidance

Work placements

Site visits

Guest lectures

Employer input at job fairs

Mock interviews

Vacancies on job boards

Volunteering and internship opportunities

Appendix 2: Benefits of employer engagement

Provider

- Student employability
- Current and relevant curricula
- Responsive and relevant provision
- Provider of choice (for students and business)
- Identification of skills gaps and demand (opportunities)
- Identification of niche markets
- Professional accreditation
- Knowledge transfer/exchange
- Status and reputation
- Collaborative opportunities
- Income generation

Student/ graduate

- Enhanced employability
- Vocationally relevant curriculum
- Access to industry-standard resources
- Opportunities for workplace and/or placement learning
- Opportunity to develop workplace-relevant skills, experience and knowledge
- Mentorship opportunities
- Sponsorship/scholarship opportunities
- Work experience (voluntary and/or employed)

Employer

- Responsive provision to support workforce development and upskilling
- Access to a skilled graduate workforce
- Knowledge transfer
- Access to facilities, services (including consultancy), and bespoke training and development opportunities
- Commercial advantage

Local
community

- Flexible learning opportunities
- Workforce development
- Enhanced employability
- Access to flexible, demand-led learning/
training opportunities
- Economic regeneration and success
- Access to free events - for example, lectures
or performances

Business
community/
economy

- Workforce development
- Economic regeneration and success

Appendix 3: The way forward

Strategic approaches

- Take a more strategic approach to engagement
- Ensure greater consistency in processes and opportunities across the institution
- Develop, maintain and monitor strategies and plans for effective employer engagement

Links with employers

- Develop, initiate and sustain effective links with employers and industry
- Establish effective committees, forums and/or boards

Management of quality and standards

- Involve employers and/or industry representatives in validation events, as formal panel members or through providing feedback on proposals
- Involve employers and/or industry representatives in programme review and monitoring activities
- Work with Awarding Bodies to define the role of employers and partners and meet their expectations of employer engagement and student employability
- Provide opportunities for employers to provide feedback as part of:
 - programme proposals to support and inform approval and validation
 - review and monitoring arrangements, to ensure the currency and relevance of programmes

Curriculum design

- Share good practice, to support the embedding of employer engagement in curriculum design and delivery
- Involve employers in the development and design of the curriculum, in respect of the volume and quality of their contribution
- Ensure greater consistency in the approach across different schools and programmes within an institution

Curriculum delivery

Provide staff development opportunities to enable staff to maintain up-to-date professional/subject/industry knowledge and experience, in order to ensure the validity, currency and relevance of the curriculum

Encourage input from employers into the delivery of the curriculum through guest lectures, talks and/or workplace visits

Work-based learning

Ensure that there is equality of opportunity for students to participate in work-based/placement learning activities, within and across programmes/institutions

Develop plans for work-based learning, to support the enhancement of learning opportunities

Assessment

Increasing the opportunities for employers to participate in and provide feedback on student assessment, in order to support student achievement and attainment

Information

Improve information about the APEL requirements for recruitment and admissions, and make this information accessible

Provide information to for employers, articulating and describing expectations and roles in respect of activities, to include; general engagement, work placed learning, mentoring, assessment and the provision of feedback

Impact

Monitor the impact of employer engagement activity, in respect of the provider, employers, the local community and students (graduates)

Collect and use data and information as part of performance monitoring, to include student employability data and feedback from employers

Appendix 4: A model of employer engagement for supporting and enhancing student employability

Intended outcome

Enhancing student employability

The creation of work-ready graduates for employers, to meet their skills needs, and be ready equipped with the skills, knowledge and experience required for the work place

Mechanism

(identified and suggested)

Development of effective and sustainable strategic approaches to engagement with employers (and their representatives), embedded at the central and devolved level, with appropriate supporting structures and resources*

Identification of local demands and needs for skills, experience and knowledge, through:

- Market appraisal (need, demand, competitors)
- Discussions with employers and their representatives (forums, boards, partnerships)

Provision of opportunities for employer input/engagement through formal and informal channels:

- Forums and advisory committees
- Formal membership of validation panels
- Contribution as Governor
- Programme-level networks and contacts
- Designated resource
- Ad hoc enquiries and discussions
- Strategic partnerships

Input from employers into the design of the curriculum, to ensure relevance, validity and currency, through:

- Programme design
- Programme approval and validation
- Feedback on proposals

- Input from employers/industry as part of monitoring and review processes*

Embedding of appropriate professional and occupational standards into programmes, through input from professional, occupational and sector bodies (approval, validation, monitoring and review)

Input from employers into the delivery of the curriculum (as part of teaching and learning) through:

- Guest lectures
- Visiting lectures
- Master-classes
- Work-based and placement learning
- Employer involvement in the design of (real life/ work relevant)
- Employer involvement in formative and summative assessment*

Equality of opportunity of access for work-based and placement learning opportunities*

Student access to industry standard resources, to support the development of skills, knowledge and experience

Continued professional development opportunities for staff, with reference to updating of knowledge and experience through work with industry, professional practice and research*

Provision of information for employers, setting out role and expectations (of employers and students)*

Opportunity for employers to feedback on student performance, as part of supporting attainment and achievement and informing review and monitoring activities*

Employer input into careers advice and guidance, through:

- Guest lectures
- Job Fairs

- Opportunities for placements, internships, volunteering
- Mock interviews

Embedding of research in teaching and learning as part of postgraduate research and undergraduate programmes

Dissemination of good practice across programmes*

Monitoring of impact on student employability

* Areas for further development

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