Title

Institutional Strategies for Higher Education - Employer Engagement (0143)

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Abstract

With the publication of the Leitch report in 2006 there was a marked increase in the emphasis on the extent to which HE engages with employers, particularly in upskilling the nation's workforce. In this paper we report the findings of a research project designed to explore the ways in which HEIs have engaged with the Employer Engagement (EE) agenda; how they articulate and promote their approach(es) to EE; how it fits alongside other HE missions; and key success factors. Findings indicate that: EE has always been core to the purpose of HE; the 'student experience' is a key driver for EE; the success of EE is dependent on putting appropriate support systems in place; workforce development is just one aspect of EE and not a priority for all HEIs; academic involvement is key to successful EE; EE requires culture change; and achieving successful EE is a major leadership challenge for HE.

Background

Since the UK White Paper on Skills (DfES, 2003) increasing emphasis has been placed on encouraging businesses and universities to work together, and with the publication of the Leitch report in 2006 a step-change was proposed in the extent to which HE providers contribute towards upskilling the nation's workforce. At the heart of these calls has been a desire to enhance the uptake of 'higher level skills' for the knowledge economy (BIS, 2009).

In this paper we report the findings of a research project designed to explore the ways in which HE institutions have engaged with this agenda; how they articulate and promote their approach(es) to working with employers; how it fits alongside other HE missions; and key success factors.

Methodology

The research comprised a series of case studies of HE-Employer Engagement (EE) in 10 English HEIs, compiled through in-depth interviews with key institutional actors, along with analysis of the institution's strategic plan; teaching, learning and research strategies; and website.

Findings and Discussion

Findings are grouped under five main headings as outlined below:

1. **Strategic purpose of EE**: Active engagement with employers is core to the academic mission of all types of HEI. It is regarded as contributing positively to all forms of education (not just CPD and workforce development); as a key pillar of the student experience and employability; and integral to research. HEIs, however, regard their relationships with employers as broader than simply

'business' - including public sector and third sector employers and the wider social contribution of HE.

2. **Supporting and resourcing EE**: There is 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. Successful EE requires a variety of centralised and decentralised support functions to absorb the increased administrative workload; relationship building; needs assessments; and tailoring of learning solutions. 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 and greater flexibility is required in planning, staffing and financial systems.

3. **Structures for 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. 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. A need is also recognised for more flexible and responsive approaches to accreditation and study pathways.

4. **Communicating and embedding EE**: It can be useful to see EE not in terms of different activities but in terms of building different relationships with employers. Whilst some HEIs are looking for wide ranging links with a limited number of large employers; others want to work with many employers. EE is seen as a way in which HEIs can differentiate themselves and create a strong external brand although this is not always conveyed in a clear manner. The top team need to help all staff understand what they really mean by EE and how big a change in the institution they are expecting. Although progress is being made in recognising the work academic staff do in EE a major unresolved issue is whether or not they are rewarded (through career structures) for this kind of activity.

5. **Changing contexts for EE**: EE should be regarded as an evolving journey in which HEIs 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 have been used by some as a stepping stone for significant development and restructuring of EE activity, although questions remain about long-term financial sustainability. HE-EE and the changing marketplace for higher skills are placing increasing demands on HEIs to collaborate in partnerships with other organisations, which carries significant challenges for leadership of, within, and between organisations. Furthermore, the economic recession has diminished demand for executive education, CPD and tailored programmes such that HEIs may need to find alternative ways of engaging with employers.

Implications and Impact

The research concludes with a number of key lessons and points for considerations, including:

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.

Recognition of such issues is important both for those people with HE charged with outreach activities, as well as policy makers and those responsible for supporting and engaging with the HE sector. Whilst the current research is focused on English HEIs, similar challenges are faced elsewhere.

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.

References

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