Engagement in course development by employers not traditionally involved in higher education: student and employer perceptions of its impact

Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) of the Open University

The review question

Our review question was:

> What impact does employer engagement in course development have on employers and students (from the student/employer perspectives)?

Who wants to know and why?

The Department for Children, Schools and Families set the topic for this review to improve understanding of employer engagement in higher education (HE) curriculum development and, in particular, the impact (if any), of that engagement. The underlying rationale was that a number of studies have set out to capture employers' views of graduate skills and qualities, and some have indicated that employers are often not satisfied with graduates' 'softer' skills. Furthermore, policy pushes have created an environment where employer engagement is the expected norm for both higher and further education.

Methods of the review

We looked for research on engagement in course development by employers that have not traditionally been involved in higher education. We did this through keyword searches of bibliographic databases, and searches of websites and key journals. We then applied inclusion and exclusion criteria to build up a map of relevant studies. Additional criteria were applied to the studies in the map, which produced the eight studies that were used to address the research question above.

Results

- **Benefits of work-based learning to students** include gaining new and improving existing skills such as personal (e.g. increased confidence), problem-solving and communicative skills; adapting existing knowledge and skills to the needs of new situations in the workplace; managing their own learning; and applying theory in practice.

- **Benefits of work-based learning to employers** were their recognition that students'/employees' skills had improved.

- **Management of work-based learning**: issues here concerned the actors involved – students, employers, institutions/academics. For students, difficulties arose in organising placements. For employers and institutions, for example, the need to create opportunities to meet and adequately brief all involved about the aims and responsibilities of placements was emphasised.

- **Realism of work-based learning (WBL) activities** was highlighted as helping the achievement of WBL outcomes - for example, through 'live' projects.

- **Academic staff development** can arise from tutors' close working relationship with employer organisations, resulting in valuable insights into the workings of organisations and thus enhancing students' learning experiences and outcomes.

- **Barriers to engaging employers** included lack of interest, lack of understanding, and lack of ability through time and work pressures on the part of employers, and the unnecessary use by institutions/academics of academic language and terminology.

- **Size of employer organisation**: co-operation between educational providers and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) can be time-consuming; there is some evidence to suggest that engaging employers through employer networks is more beneficial.

What are the implications?

The review found that there are benefits to employer engagement (e.g. work-based learning) but there are also barriers, and one of these barriers is size of employer organisation: smaller organisations are less likely to engage with higher education. However, the review also found that there is a need for more rigorous evaluative, analytical and longitudinal studies to shed further light on the impact of employer engagement in course development – and in the disciplinary areas and occupational sectors that were the focus of this review.

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SUMMARY

Where to find further information

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The results of this systematic review are available in four formats:

SUMMARY	Explains the purpose of the review and the main messages from the research evidence
REPORT	Describes the background and the findings of the review(s) but without full technical details of the methods used
TECHNICAL REPORT	Includes the background, main findings, and full technical details of the review
DATABASES	Access to codings describing each research study included in the review

These can be downloaded or accessed at **http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/reel/**

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