Special issue: *Colleges as anchor institutions in their local community: promoting inclusive economic, social and educational growth*

Research article

'Employers at the heart of the system': whose system is it anyway?

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How to cite
Huddleston, P. and Branch-Haddow, S. (2022) "'Employers at the heart of the system": whose system is it anyway?'. *London Review of Education*, 20 (1), 28.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.20.1.28.

Peer review
This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-anonymous peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

Open access
London Review of Education is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

Abstract

Education and skills policy since the 1970s have exhorted employers to put themselves at the 'heart of the system', to engage voluntarily with colleges and other providers, in a range of roles and activities, some of which may be beyond their competence and experience. However, employers do have an important role to play, but that role should be clearly defined and directed towards those areas where their expertise and experience can be optimally deployed. To function effectively, a system requires partnership between a range of actors – learners, providers, local communities, businesses and voluntary organisations. Contributions and expectations, all of which are important, require coordination and management. It is argued that colleges are well placed to act as 'anchor

institutions' for bringing together local partners. This article provides a practical example of how one large general further education college fulfils this role.

Keywords stakeholder engagement; partnerships; education and employers; responsiveness; local economy

Introduction

Current education and skills policy (DBIS–DfE, 2016; DfE, 2021), and indeed similar policy over the past century (Huddleston, 2020), have urged employers to engage with the education and skills sector in a multiplicity of ways. The exhortation for employers to step up to the plate, on a voluntary basis, has assumed greater intensity over the past decade, with employers expected to engage in activities for which some may have neither the stomach nor the competence (Huddleston and Laczik, 2019, 2018).

However, this is not to suggest that employers do not have, and have always had, an important role to play within the skills system, particularly within our further education (FE) colleges. But a system, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, suggests 'a complex whole with a series of interconnected parts' (Sykes, 1982: 1085). For a system to function efficiently, all the parts need to work in concert, serving the needs of all stakeholders (young people, adults, those employed and not employed, colleges, local communities and wider society), not just employers. The notion of compulsion, envisaged in Local Skills Improvement Plans, introduced in the recent Skills and Post-16 Education Bill (DfE, 2021), is suggestive of a lack of understanding of what has been the modus operandi of FE colleges since their inception in the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries. Their remit has always extended beyond simply meeting employers' needs. Learning provision must address the needs of learners, not simply support business, but this is not to suggest that such aims may be in conflict; there is potential for complementarities and mutual benefit.

This article adopts a case study approach focused on the activities of a large general further education (GFE) college situated in the West Midlands to illustrate the ways in which engagement with employers is seen as a 'two-way' street, or freeway, with benefits for all partners. The college plays a key role in bringing together a wide range of partners, not just employers, to ensure mutual benefit, rather than a narrowly conceived offer to simply meet funding requirements or qualifications targets. It is suggested that similar approaches are not uncommon within the sector, but that this often remains hidden from those who direct policy and legislate for the sector.

The direction of travel outlined in the recent Skills and Post-16 Education Bill (DfE, 2021), and its statutory requirement for employer representative bodies to lead the development of local plans, is in danger of reinforcing an instrumental top-down approach, with employers 'in the driving seat' (DBIS–DfE, 2016: 18), rather than a mutually supportive partnership of stakeholders, with colleges acting as local anchor institutions. The case study illustrates ways in which colleges are well placed to engage with a wider set of social partners, to enrich the curriculum, to embrace pedagogic challenges and to provide professional development opportunities both within and beyond colleges. The college can act as a bridge to build understanding across the range of stakeholders who have a legitimate interest in our colleges. Their mission is not just to serve the needs of employers but the needs of all partners in the system.

'Employers at the heart of the system': looking back, looking forward

The history of FE colleges from the early twentieth century reveals the close relationships forged by colleges with industries and employers in order to provide mainly technical and commercial courses serving local needs. There were exceptions where a broader curriculum was offered, for example basic English and mathematics, and sometimes science, for aspiring young people, the majority of whom had left full-time education at 14, to improve their opportunities for employment or promotion (Hodgson et al., 2015). Colleges were firmly rooted in their local areas; some larger cities had several colleges

(Birmingham had nine in the 1970s) reflecting local needs. The Rushden Boot and Shoe School, for example, opened in 1928, initially with 200 students, to serve the needs of the burgeoning local boot and shoe industry and to improve the quality of manufacture. Around the same period, Leicester Technical College provided evening classes for operatives in the local hosiery industry. The School of Hospitality (now Westminster Kingsway College), opened by Auguste Escoffier in 1910, reflected the demand for highly trained chefs and hospitality managers in the growing hotel and restaurant sector.

The qualifications to which students aspired also involved employers substantially in their syllabus design and examinations. City and Guilds (n.d.), established in 1878, was founded in response to employers' demand for the teaching and examining of technical and practical subjects. Venables (1955) also describes the development of National Certificates, awarded at ordinary and higher level, as the predominant qualification offering in FE colleges for the next 30 years. The curriculum and assessment design involved a partnership between colleges, industry and the professions. More recent examples of attempted employer engagement in the design of qualifications include: the ill-fated 14–19 Diplomas; T levels, currently under development; and apprenticeship standards. While a succession of legislation over the past 30 years has encouraged employers to engage in qualification development, it is a voluntary activity (Huddleston and Laczik, 2018). A recent policy report by Pearson (2021: 8) suggests that 'limiting the development of all qualifications to employer-led standards will not allow for the flexibility and agility needed to meet newly emerging demand, and jobs of the future'.

From this perspective, employers were, and continue to be, exhorted to sit 'at the heart of the system', but colleges were also responsive to the wider needs of their local communities, providing a range of evening classes in technical and commercial subjects, academic subjects and recreational programmes for adults. Adult education was seen as an appropriate response to the interests and aspirations of local communities, and as an important contributor to lifelong learning. Enshrined within the 1944 Education Act was the duty of local education authorities to provide a FE service to meet the needs of the population of their area, both adults and young people, either through full-time or part-time attendance (Maclure, 1973). Currently, the number of adults in FE has plummeted, from just under 4 million in 2004/5 to under 3 million in 2013/14, to less than 2 million in 2019/20 (Hubble et al., 2021). Much of this decline is attributed to cuts in funding for adult provision, although in the aftermath of COVID-19, focus is shifting to the need for adults to retrain and re-skill (DfE, 2021). Even so, the recent Skills and Post-16 Education Bill interprets 'demand' as employer demand for skills, rather than what local learners might demand, or be interested in. This is also reflected in the proposed funding allocations. As Kenyon (2022: 29) suggests: 'This is not a lifetime skills guarantee but a one-time skills top-up.'

During the 1970s and 1980s, colleges increasingly focused attention on the needs of younger learners within their local communities. This included 16–18-year-olds wishing to attend full-time pre-vocational, vocational and technical courses, such as those offered by the Business Education Council or by the Technician Education Council, which later merged to form the Business and Technician Education Council, and those students wishing to follow general education programmes, such as A levels and GCSEs. Raising the Participation Age (DfE, 2012) provided colleges with opportunities to attract increasing numbers of 16–19-year-old students, but this intensified direct competition with other providers, mainly schools with sixth forms, but also private training providers, creating challenges for those wishing to adopt a partnership approach to local provision. It is also now possible for colleges to enrol 14–16-year-olds to complete some of their compulsory education away from school.

With the rise in youth unemployment during the late 1970s, and continuing into the 1980s, the provision of appropriate training, leading, it was hoped, to ultimate employment, preoccupied national policymakers. Colleges were seen to a significant extent as the natural loci of provision, although private training providers were playing an increasing role. Such provision was tied to funding with associated targets, including qualification achievement, timely completion and tightly defined curricula, leaving little room for flexibility or for a more broadly based educational offering (Ainley, 1988; Ainley and Allen, 2017; Maguire, 2015; McGinty and Fish, 1993). Notwithstanding the criticisms levelled at such schemes/initiatives, the names of which have changed over the decades, their intent remains constant – the need to provide for those young people, and increasingly adults, who are facing, for whatever reason, barriers to entry into the labour market. The reasons for such barriers are complex at the individual, local, regional and national level. National policy prescription cannot adequately capture the nuances of individual and local circumstances, yet the prescription and associated funding mechanisms are essentially 'top-down' and nationally focused.

The recent White Paper commits once again to 'putting employers at the heart of Post 16 skills' (DfE, 2021: 131) – a familiar refrain, but difficult to achieve in practice. In its latest iteration, employers will be given 'a central role working with further education colleges, other providers, and local stakeholders to develop new Local Skills Improvement Plans which shape technical skills provision so that it meets local labour market needs' (DfE, 2021: 8).

Close reading of the document reveals many familiar concerns and proposed remedies for improving the Post-16 skills landscape. Although the suggestion is that this time it will 'unleash our latent creativity and talent', much will depend on the willingness of all partners to engage in yet another round of conversations and putative reforms. Nash and Jones (2015: 34) outline persistent issues that have exercised policymakers since the incorporation of FE colleges in 1993, namely to 'improve the nation's skills; align 14–19 curriculum more closely to the workplace; encourage more adults into learning; develop social cohesion and well-being'. This extends beyond simply 'putting employers in the driving seat'.

We have briefly outlined the ways in which FE throughout its history has attempted to respond to the competing demands of its stakeholders, and noted that employers have always had close relationships with their colleges, but employers are not sole stakeholders. Positive partnerships bring benefits to all stakeholders, and colleges have always had to manage competing priorities, and tensions, including those of students, staff, local communities, employers, funders, unions and professional bodies.

In presenting our findings of the 'lived reality' in one large, metropolitan GFE college, we adopt a case study approach (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982) to illustrate the complexity and subtlety of social interactions when exploring at times contested terrain. Competing demands and expectations require careful management; a case study offers views of different participants (employers, learners and teachers, for example). It is a 'step to action' (Adelman et al., 1980), based in action, and drawing on it to serve as an exemplar and support for those working within similar contexts.

It is in this sense 'an instrumental case study' (Stake, 1994: 237). It is offered to advance our understanding of the ways in which FE colleges engage with their local communities, and also to dispel some of the myths surrounding this alleged 'lack of engagement' suggested in education and skills policy over the past half century, and outlined in the foregoing section of this article. We suggest it allows generalisation to other colleges working to deliver the requirements of the recent legislation. The case study illustrates how one large GFE situated in the West Midlands, through its Business Engagement Team, seeks to ensure that the interests of all partners are secured, while meeting its strategic priorities.

Case study BMet: a college at the heart of the ecosystem

BMet is a large, multi-campus GFE situated in Birmingham, recruiting around 10,000 students annually. It serves a diverse community across Birmingham and the city region and offers around 200 courses, both full-time and part-time, from entry to degree level and professional study. Areas of specialism include health and social care, construction, advanced manufacturing and engineering, business and professional services, creative and digital. In addition, a range of A level programmes is available, and the college is a leading apprenticeship provider, currently with 800 apprentices. Given that one of its strategic priorities is 'to be a significant contributor to skills development in Birmingham and the City Region' (BMet, 2021: n.p.), employer engagement is a significant part of the college's external relations, and is led by the Vice-Principal, External Development and a team of 31 staff. The job title suggests that the work is considered of significant strategic importance, and recognised at senior management level.

However, the college must also address its other strategic priorities, including 'providing a consistently high-quality learning experience; equipping students for the future; being an inspiring place to work' (BMet, 2021: n.p.). Priorities have to be balanced, and they need not be viewed as potentially competing, but as mutually supportive. The case study outlines the approach taken.

A strategic approach: the three pillars

BMet's External Development Strategy is built on three pillars, as explained by the Vice-Principal:

- Regional economic business partnership: positioning BMet as a key part of the regional economic ecosystem, supporting organisations to achieve stability and growth

- Skills leadership: offering guidance and insight to the regional business community, enhancing BMet's reputation for helping others by providing knowledge, advice and guidance
- Giving voice to our students: amplifying the voice, concerns and achievements of our diverse student body to the business community.

This strategy was developed in response to the global pandemic, when it became clear that the college needed to take a strong partnership approach to support both businesses and students through significant uncertainty and turbulence in order to prevent a repeat of the skills challenges that arose from the financial crash of 2007/8. The case study outlines some of the impact of this strategy through feedback from all stakeholders. The impact can also be measured by some of BMet's performance indicators, including a 200 per cent growth year-on-year in one of the college's specialist areas (Professional Services Sector Academy), 100 per cent of 16–19-year-old students with work experience opportunities (despite the closure of workplaces during the pandemic – see 'live briefs' under 'Pillar 2' below) and ensuring that fewer than five apprentices from a cohort of seven hundred were made redundant without completing their apprenticeship programme during the pandemic period.

The college aspires to 'knit itself' into the regional community and sees itself as an integral part of the ecosystem. It is not simply a group of campus buildings where education happens, it is instead a college that has a significant role in the inclusive growth and development of the city economy, and in serving the people in the city.

The model of partnership often starts as a 'bridging' or 'translation' service between FE and stakeholders, helping and supporting one another to understand each other's worlds, not shouting across the barricades. Discussion focuses on what can or cannot be flexed, and what is possible given commercial and macro-pressures, and it considers internal challenges from the perspectives of all stakeholders (including programme/teacher capacity):

> You cannot promise what you cannot deliver, so the enthusiasm of the business development team needs to be informed by the realities of what is possible in terms of college resource. Members of the business development team, dedicated account managers, link directly with programme directors to ensure shared understanding around capacity and quality. (Notes from presentation by BMet to visiting North American academics, March 2022)

Mutual benefits are also explored, for example, educating commercial partners that live projects or student work placements can be of operational benefit to the business, both directly (through the generation of new insights and ideas) and indirectly (through supporting a culture of inclusivity). They provide opportunities for employers to interact with potential recruits and, for some sectors, with their existing or potential customer base. Examples also include facilitating 'peer-to-peer' knowledge sharing across employers and other stakeholders to co-learn and share initiatives that support industry priorities.

The college's Professional Services Sector Academy, for example, facilitates discussion around developing inclusive and innovative recruitment models to improve social mobility and diversity within the sector: students work on live briefs set by business partners to address current problems. This forms part of an enhanced work experience model, enabling firms to test their operational processes with their target audience (the workforce of the future) and, in some cases, providing a mechanism for firms to recruit directly from a pool of candidates into their organisation, including candidates who would not previously have considered a job in this sector. For example, the city's financial services sector is located less than a mile from the college campus, and yet some students are unaware of its existence, even though they may be pursuing a course in a germane area.

Pillar 1: regional economic business partner – positioning BMet as a key part of the regional economic ecosystem, supporting organisations with stability and growth

Central to the achievement of this priority is the college's mindset and commitment to stakeholder engagement. This is reflected in the appointment of its professional staff. The External Development Directorate includes a team of specialists experienced and skilled in building stakeholder relationships. The directorate's expertise spans business development, sales, work experience, schools engagement, marketing, research and innovation.

The Vice-Principal of External Development represents the directorate at a senior leadership level, reporting directly to the college's Chief Executive Officer and Principal. External development, employer

engagement and student work placements are regular agenda items at Corporation meetings and at the Academic Quality and Standards Committee. One of the independent governors has a specific interest in this area of the college's activity, ensuring that the importance placed on external engagement and development across the college is visible, accountable and prominent.

As with all teams, the directorate is made up of a mix of expertise 'but the key strength and skill that threads through every individual is the strength in building and nurturing relationships based on trust and confidence' (Vice-Principal of External Development). This is achieved not only through responsive day-to-day interaction with stakeholders, clients (currently around 300) and organisations, but also through some key tactics, including:

- *Sector engagement*: the college acts as representative for staff, students and clients across various external stakeholder and networking bodies through official roles, for example being the 'FE voice' on a business sector representation board. It is also an active, engaged member of several industry and community networks, regularly attending collaborative industry- or community-led events and presentations. The partnerships extend to partnerships with other 16–19 training providers, and, in particular, other FE colleges through informal arrangements, but also through joint projects, including collaboration through the Institute of Technology, projects funded by the European Social Fund, and innovation activity funded through regional development.
- *Employer boards*: employers from key local and regional sectors are invited into college to review programmes – including content, format and delivery models, in order to assess their alignment with sector needs. The Greater Birmingham Professional Services Academy is based at the college, supported by a board of employers from the regional business professional services sector – a key sector within the local and regional economy. Business partners help in shaping the programmes to ensure that they meet sector needs, but also that they raise the visibility of employment within the sector. One business partner described it thus: 'It's a great partnership. We are part of that [BMet] team, and I'd like to think that BMet are part of the [company] family as well.'

Pillar 2: skills leadership – offering guidance, insight into the regional business community, and providing BMet with a positive reputation for helping others with their knowledge and insight

The External Development Team recognises that the skills landscape, particularly within FE, can change rapidly and is confusing to stakeholders: 'We firmly believe a significant part of our role is to simplify and demystify that landscape, aiding organisations to navigate sources of help that might be available to them to support business growth' (External Development Team member).

The college operationalises this collaborative approach in a number of ways: through targeted communications and campaigns; through acting as bridge-builder and translator; and through signposting opportunities.

- *Communications and campaigns*: through its close strategic relationship with local Chambers of Commerce, the college led a series of 'Skills' presentations, aimed to simplify the skills landscape, and to support business understanding and engagement. This activity included working in collaboration with two local universities to co-partner and sponsor the 'Growth through People Conference' where the CEO and Principal joined other civic and business leaders on a panel exploring: 'Achieving Inclusivity throughout Industry'. Commenting on the partnership, the CEO of the Chamber noted: 'It really is a great partnership, and I think that's a big part of what comes across in these joint endeavours ... certainly food for thought around how we can do more of that in future. Thanks for being a fab partner.'
- *Bridge-building and translating*: the college aims to act responsively and flexibly to meet the needs of its students, local business and other stakeholders. Post-COVID-19, these needs are changing and new ones have emerged, for example, increased demand for adult re-training, while existing ones have assumed greater urgency, for example, provision for ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) learners. 'The make-up of the city and region's economy, its specialism in manufacturing, exports and tourism, means the nature of the economic crisis has acutely affected the city and wider region' (Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce, 2021: 5).

Employers may look for speedy responses to current problems: 'we need skilled carpenters right now'; 'too few applicants with adequate English'; 'very disappointing that we had so few local young people

coming forward for these engineering apprenticeships'. However pressing these issues are from an employer perspective, their remedy is not always a quick fix. Understanding needs to be built on what is possible, and what accommodation can be achieved.

In this context, the college sees its role as 'bridge-builder' and 'translator'. Through its relationship management, it is able to support organisations to understand the setting in which further education has to operate. In doing so it can explain areas of challenge or difficulty (timescales, funding regimes, bidding processes) but it can also identify opportunities and build more robust and successful relationships:

> We have heard organisations become frustrated at the lack of engagement from education establishments when they are actively approached by industry for work experience or project-based activity. When reviewing the approach with an organisation, we often identify that the 'sticking point' is the timing and will work with our employers to encourage them to look to launch work experience initiatives away from periods such as May–July when exams, course deadlines etc. will take priority. (External Development Team member)

- *Opportunities*: in the past 12–18 months, as the college reacted to the global pandemic, it had to rethink and quickly redesign its approach to work experience, working closely with employers to explore and develop alternative approaches to physical workplace activity. In doing so, it has built an engaging and successful 'live brief' programme, enabling organisations, public and private, large and small, to set projects or challenges for students to work on and develop solutions. The results are shared through 'best-practice' employer-to-employer round-table events to build an understanding of what a successful and supportive work experience programme looks like. It is useful to reflect that, during the pandemic, there remained an expectation within qualifications for the inclusion of periods of student work experience (particularly within T levels), even when actual workplaces were closed.

Examples of live briefs developed include media students creating promotional videos for a high-end beverage brand, travel and tourism students proposing a post-COVID-19 'relaunch' marketing campaign for a local travel agency, and art and design students completing a brief on behalf of a major national bank.

Commenting on the 'live brief' for the art and design students, a senior manager from the bank said: 'There were some great submissions from the team with some really creative approaches. I know they [bank staff] have enjoyed the engagement with the students, and it feels like this has been a real win/win initiative all round.'

The integration of live briefs into work experience activity has also enabled the college to develop more impactful relationships with community institutions. In a recent example, students created designs to help a local council realise its vision for improving the experience of the town for all through public art. Following the council-led brief and subsequent project, a student's design was selected to be developed into a sculpture, and installed on a main travel route within the town.

Pillar 3: student visibility – amplifying the voice, concerns and achievements of our diverse student population to the business community

The national policy priority for education and skills is reflected in regional and local concerns about education and skills within the Greater Birmingham area, in particular the inner-city areas which the college serves:

> Its labour market links are particularly strong in terms of providing employment for residents of neighbouring areas within the city and for Birmingham residents commuting to neighbouring areas for work. When positioned next to Birmingham's comparatively low employment rate, the high level of people who commute into the city suggests an imbalance in the local labour market between residents' skill levels and jobs. (Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce, 2021: 5)

Such concerns are frequently voiced at business-to-business and community events. Topics under discussion include understanding current skills gaps, identifying the needs of jobs in the future and developing strategies to make organisations more attractive for people to work in. The External

Development Team engages with a range of organisations through one-to-one meetings and networking events, and acting as guest speakers and bloggers. The approach is seen, by one of its members, as crucial to 'not only listen to the concerns and needs, but to look at how we can develop solutions and play an active and integral part in building a strong economy and community'.

The college sees itself in a privileged position to amplify the voice of its students, for example by sharing case studies, stories and feedback from students with the wider community. A recent example of this approach involved a partnership and commissioned research with an insight and engagement agency – a company of young creatives – to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on young people, in particular to explore the impact on careers, education, money, mental health and social value. The output was a research report that has been shared across the stakeholder community and wider region to amplify the messages and findings, and from it an action-led response will be created to address some of the challenges raised through the research findings.

Part of the college's response included hosting a skills panel debate with the Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce and its members. On this occasion, the dynamics were different – the audience was made up of members of the business community, while the panel comprised young people at different stages of their careers. They included, among others, female apprentice engineers and A level students, providing the audience with an insight into their personal experiences and views on some of the perceived and actual barriers in terms of skills, education and careers within the local area.

As part of the college's annual student satisfaction survey, two questions relate to students' perceptions of the ways in which the college prepares them for the future (including further study or employment). While responses cannot be directly attributed to employer engagement activities, it is reasonable to assume that some of the opportunities offered have been influential. This will require further detailed investigation in future sweeps of the survey. Of the 4,723 students targeted in the BMet Big Student Survey (response rate 75 per cent), 92 per cent *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that 'the college is helping me to think about my next steps'; 86 per cent of students *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with 'I feel confident about my future'.

Celebrating the success of others, sharing the achievements of students and staff across the community – not just at college, but throughout the city more widely – is an important part of the approach. Other student-focused engagement includes sponsorship for awards – for example, the Greater Birmingham Apprenticeship Awards and regional media business awards. The approach to sponsorship is an active partnership, involving, among other things, membership of judging panels, acting as a host venue, and using the college's social media channels and networks to amplify the award messages.

Through its External Engagement Team, the college seeks to engage with the local and regional community, to serve the interests of all its stakeholders, including, crucially, those who study, live and work there. This engagement extends beyond the business constituency to embrace local community organisations and other voluntary groups. A prominent local community association is represented at Corporation level by its Chief Officer. In doing so, it reflects the college's mission and strategic priorities:

> We will respect the interests of all of our stakeholders, recognising that the college is an important part of the local communities that it serves … We will actively consult our stakeholders, and we will seek to harness the knowledge and skills of stakeholders to secure outstanding outcomes for our learners. We will seek to ensure that the college is integral to local economic development … working closely with the local economic partnerships and employers, and by providing high quality training and education to meet the needs of the business community. (Adapted from BMet's Corporate Social Responsibility Statement, BMet, 2021)

Discussion and conclusions

The foregoing case study serves to illustrate one FE college's response to the variety of roles that it is required to play in order to fulfil its obligations to the diverse range of stakeholders that have a legitimate interest in its purposes and outcomes. It could be argued that 'holding the ring' between competing demands of funders, learners, employers, communities and inspectors, requires it to be the servant, not of two, but of many 'masters'. However, where such interests are seen as complementary rather

than conflicting, the task, although still challenging, becomes more productive and beneficial to a wider constituency of partners.

Policy directives over the past 30 years, at least, have seen employer engagement in education and training as the panacea to cure all the alleged ills of the system – skills shortages, poor quality vocational and educational training and low levels of qualifications. The list is not exhaustive, but exhausting. Often, this has resulted in a situation where partners blame each other for systemic weaknesses and failures (Field, 2019). Much of the cause lies in the, often limited, understanding of what the partners can reasonably be expected to do, particularly when such engagement is predicated on voluntarism. Policy prescriptions should focus on what is reasonable, manageable and meaningful, and how this might be achieved. This is dependent on a better understanding of the issues involved between all stakeholders, not only employers, within the education and skills ecosystem.

The case study illustrates some productive ways in which the college is bringing together a wide range of stakeholders across its area, and acting as a 'bridge' and 'interpreter'. This is predicated on the college engaging in dialogues that expose local concerns, for example, how to attract recruits to particular jobs, or identifying specific training needs not covered by standard programmes. A current example is the need to provide training, and rapidly, for the large number of 'welcome hosts' that will be required for the 2022 Commonwealth Games.

The college's role as 'interpreter' also extends to its work with schools and community groups. Communicating with both groups is challenging, but for different reasons: in the first case, access because of competition; and, in the second, identifying who is in these groups and where these groups are located. In both cases, the college has staff dedicated to the role. Building these partnerships requires trust that can only be built up over time. Local intelligence is important. Interpretation involves far more than simply translating.

The college positions and promotes itself as an economic business partner within the region. It is not only a business, but it has similar concerns to many other local and regional businesses. It needs 'a strong financial base to invest in a sustainable future for the college' (BMet, 2021: n.p.). This provides common ground for discussions with other stakeholders, including local communities, local government, businesses, the West Midlands Combined Authority and the Chambers of Commerce. The college endeavours to find solutions to mutual problems, for example, through its engagement with the business professional services sector. It strives to dispel perceptions that colleges are the cause of the challenges besetting the education and skills landscape.

The work involves 'crossing boundaries', both those of knowledge and power, since different actors are differentially placed in terms of voice (Filstad et al., 2018). The college demonstrates how it gives voice to students through a variety of engaging and relevant channels, for example, involving students in live projects, discussion panels and on social media. Boundary crossing also involves understanding the needs of employers, and those of learners, 'so that the emergent curriculum knowledge looks both ways, satisfying both work and academic requirements' (Garraway, 2010: 211).

For colleges to serve as anchor institutions in their local community, they must be 'clearer about their vocational mission and convey this more carefully to employers as well as actively seeking to co-design and co-develop their programmes with their clients' (Hodgson and Spours, 2015: 215). The case study provides some useful pointers as to how this can be achieved. However, it has been shown that this requires expert and dedicated resources (business, PR and marketing professionals). It requires commitment from governors, representing a range of backgrounds and expertise, senior managers and staff. It requires staff to work on a number of levels – local, regional and national – and to make connections across and between them, identifying opportunities for mutual benefit.

For this to be achieved, it requires a much broader constituency and consensus, beyond simply putting employers at the 'heart of the system' or 'in the driving seat'. Employers are one part of an interrelated and interdependent ecosystem in which colleges have a key role to play. It is a system in which, as we have demonstrated, there are many stakeholders, all of whom have legitimate interest in and claims upon it. In answering the question that we set out to address – 'whose system is it anyway?' – we contend that ownership extends beyond employers. In the framing of education and skills policy, it would be productive and equitable to ensure that all stakeholders are given a voice in shared ownership of the system.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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