Perceptions and Experiences of Employer Engagement amongst University Staff: A Case Study

Abstract

The UK government and universities have stepped up calls for engagement with employers in response to the economic downturn and partial withdrawal of public funding. In this context, universities' commitment to employer engagement at a corporate policy level is clear. But how well is the concept of employer engagement understood by university staff expected to carry it out? This case study (n=96) of one post-1992 university indicates that there is a substantial level of uncertainty, self-reported ignorance, incomplete understandings and even outright resistance to the concept of employer engagement. Only a minority of respondents to a mixed methods web-based survey felt they understood the context around calls for employer engagement. On the positive side, a slim majority of respondents were able to offer a definition that accurately accounted for at least one aspect of employer engagement at some level. Also, a clear majority of respondents had some prior experience with employer engagement. This paper argues that the lack of shared understanding around this concept comprises a significant barrier to its adoption by university staff. However, it is argued that this barrier can be overcome.

Keywords

employer engagement, public engagement, business engagement

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**Introduction**

Employer engagement has become a key emphasis in higher education policy in recent years. This issue is perhaps more salient than ever given the continuing withdrawal of public funding from universities in the UK and the high unemployment rate facing graduates in the current economic climate.

**Making Employer Engagement Corporate Policy**

Responding to these and other concerns, Anglia Ruskin University has placed a particular focus on employer engagement within its governing documents. Indeed, employer engagement is repeatedly cited in the University’s Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy document, both as a means of enhancing the quality of student learning and improving student employability. For example, strong links with employers throughout the University curriculum and operations address Guiding Precepts and Principles (PP) 2 (‘Developing the person’), 3 (‘A partnership approach’) and 5 (‘National and Global Perspectives’) identified in this document. Employer engagement promotes PP2 by facilitating the development of ‘transferable skills’ and ‘personal development’. PP3 highlights the importance of partnering with ‘institutions, organisations and employers in the region’ to deliver successful joined up learning opportunities. Moreover, PP5 explicitly addresses employer engagement:

> “Anglia Ruskin students should be equipped to function and contribute in a range of contexts, including employment and engagement in a knowledge-based community”. (emphasis added)

Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2007—2010, Anglia Ruskin University, p. 2.

Employer engagement is further emphasised as a Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategic Objective (SO4):

> “Include measures and processes, including employer engagement, to enhance employability prospects for students.”

Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2007—2010, Anglia Ruskin University, p. 3.

In this vein, SO4.4 calls for ‘establish[ing] a meaningful engagement with employers’ and SO4.6 emphasises ‘work placement with partner institutions’. Both of these objectives will benefit from the proposed project (Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2007—2010, Anglia Ruskin University, p. 9).

**Unknown Factors in University-Based Employer Engagement**

Thus, Anglia Ruskin University has a clear policy emphasis favouring employer engagement. However, it is not clear to what degree University staff are committed to this agenda and why. As such, the present research was undertaken to assess current levels of employer engagement across the University. Possible benefits from such research includes a range of outcomes associated with employer engagement, including ‘higher levels of graduate employment’, as well as ‘maintaining and enhancing the currency of the curriculum’ (Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2007—2010, Anglia Ruskin University, p. 4).

Despite the clear importance of employer engagement at institutional and public policy levels, it is often left to the individual initiative of staff members. Given the competing pressures of other academic responsibilities, some Anglia Ruskin academic staff may feel they do not have the capacity to develop new relationships with employers from scratch, and full-time staff with an explicit employer engagement remit may not be sufficiently linked in with academic staff able to deliver vital knowledge and intellectual services for companies and third sector organisations. The results of this case study of staff attitudes and
experiences of employer engagement at the University level can help other universities understand and facilitate employer relationship building on a more collective and systematic basis.

Methods

A web-based questionnaire with both quantitative and qualitative items was employed to investigate employer engagement at Anglia Ruskin University. The aim of this mixed methods approach is ‘methodological triangulation’, wherein the benefits and limitations of quantitative and qualitative survey items can be at least partially transcended through the identification of overlapping patterns (see Jensen & Holliman, 2009). Likewise, this approach allows for both an overview perspective on the prevalence of certain response patterns, as well as scope for more in-depth exploration of individuals’ experiences and ideas. Because Anglia Ruskin University has two main campuses (one in Cambridge and one in Essex), a web-based questionnaire was used to allow sampling to extend across the entire University, reducing issues of geography.

This survey is only intended to comprise an exploratory case study of perceptions of employer engagement at one point in time (late 2010), at one post-1992 university in southeast England. Perceptions may vary across time and institutions.

Sample

The total sample of 96 Anglia Ruskin University staff members was skewed towards women (see table below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>66</td>
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</table>

Table 1. Sample Distribution

There were more experienced staff members in the sample \( n=60 \) than early career staff members \( n=36 \). The sample had slightly more academic staff members \( n=52 \) than non-academic \( n=44 \). In addition, there were somewhat more Chelmsford-based staff \( n=49 \) than Cambridge-based staff \( n=41 \) in the sample, with a handful of respondents based at neither or both campuses \( n=6 \).

Results

Quantitative Results

A number of the questions on this survey were Likert scale (level of agreement) items. The results for these questions are reported below underneath the italic statements in order to provide context for the subsequent analysis of qualitative data, revealing the way in which employer engagement is understood by University staff.

“I feel I understand the changing context behind calls for business engagement”

(full sample)
Table 2. Perceived Understanding of Engagement Context

The mean score on this question was 2.69. That is, respondents’ average level of self-reported contextual understanding about employer engagement was less than the mid-point of 3 (neutral).

“I feel I understand the changing context behind calls for business engagement.”

(academic respondents only; n=52)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Agreement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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</tr>
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Table 3. Academic Staff Understanding of Engagement Context

For academics only, 21 did not feel they understood the context behind calls for employer engagement, as compared to 20 who did (with 11 neutral on this question). The mean level of agreement on this question (with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree) was 2.71. Thus, academic respondents’ average level of self-reported contextual understanding about employer engagement was less than the mid-point of 3 (neutral).
“Have you ever had any discussions or dealings with businesses (or other potential employers) in your field?”

<table>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>32</td>
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Table 4. Past Engagement Experience
A substantial majority of respondents reported that they have had some prior experience with employer engagement.

“Within my range of responsibilities, employer engagement is a top priority for me.”

(full sample)

<table>
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Table 5. Prioritisation of Employer Engagement
Overall, most respondents did not view employer engagement as a top priority within their range of professional responsibilities. Only 30% indicated that they believed employer engagement to be a top priority for them.

“Within my range of responsibilities, employer engagement is a top priority for me.”

(academic staff only; n=52)
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
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Table 6. Academic Staff Prioritisation of Employer Engagement

Interestingly, the level of agreement with this question was slightly higher (34%) amongst academic staff, although still very low. At the same time, there was also a slightly greater proportion of respondents who rejected (‘disagree’ or ‘strongly disagree’) the idea that employer engagement was a top priority for them amongst academic staff (36.5%) when compared to the full sample (34.6%).

**Qualitative Results**

**Defining Employer Engagement**

The present study suggests that there may not be a shared understanding of the concept of employer engagement amongst University personnel. This was measured using an open-ended question that asked respondents to ‘Please define “employer engagement” as you understand it, in your own words (in as much detail as possible)’. Only a minority of respondents were able to provide an accurate definition when asked. Amongst those able to provide a definition, some focused on employer engagement as a tool for curriculum development, while others identified promotional aims. Still others pointed to a wide range of activities falling under the category of employer engagement. First, the relatively rare example of a detailed, multi-faceted definition of employer engagement came from an early career academic. This respondent acknowledged the localised nature of her knowledge of the concept, while providing a very detailed response that shows both a depth and breadth of practical understanding.

“In my area, employer engagement has a number of aspects: 1. To work with employers to support them to send their staff on the BA in order to qualify [...] 2. Working with employers and key personnel in the region to sit on our Strategic Advisory Group in order to impact and feed into the curriculum 3. Liaising with employers to support them to offer themselves as potential placement settings or to allow their qualified staff to supervise students on placement 4. Where positive relationships have been built, we often get asked to let students know of staff vacancies in the field.”

(female, early career, academic)

A similarly detailed and well-rounded definition came from an experienced academic:
“Liaising with employers for mutual benefit. This might involve an employer tapping into academic expertise, academics finding out what courses would serve the needs of employers and their staff, academics finding out what products or tools employers need to be developed (e.g. software design). Engagement might involve helping students secure jobs or training with local companies. Employers might use their expertise to help academics deliver teaching – for example with a more vocational course like publishing.”

(female, experienced, academic)

Crucially, some of the respondents understood the core idea around employer engagement: That it offers a two-way relationship, which is mutually beneficial. The recognition of this aspect of employer engagement can be seen in the following extract:

“Employer engagement is the University and an employer forging a relationship that benefits both the institution and the employer. The University and the employer develop a course, including modules, for the employers/employees to take and gain a qualification which is both relevant to the employee but beneficial to the employer.”

(male, early career, non-academic)

This emphasis on mutual benefit between University and employer can also be seen in the following extract:

“Initiating and developing links which are mutually beneficial to our students/graduates and employers. Involving employers in a range of activities but not necessarily offering permanent employment.”

(female, experienced, non-academic)

However, as will become clear below, this kind of response represents a minority of respondents.

Unreconstructed Ignorance

The largest single category of responses to this item was leaving the space blank (n=24), which is likely to signal an inability to directly or confidently answer the question. However, a number of respondents directly expressed their ignorance of the concept and its possible meaning. For example, statements such as ‘No idea at all’ (male, early career, academic); ‘I don’t have any understanding of this phrase’ (female, early career, non-academic); ‘I don’t actually know what it means’ (female, early career, non-academic); ‘I do not know what this entails’ (female, experienced, non-academic); and ‘I do not have a clue’ (male, early career, academic) fell under this category. One respondent expressed ignorance of the term, then guessed incorrectly at its meaning: ‘Sorry, it doesn’t mean anything to me. Maybe that my employer cares for me as employee?’ (male, early career, academic). Another explicitly indicated that she had a non-standard understanding of the term, which she recognised as incorrect in light of the survey she was completing: ‘This is the first time I am hearing this term. I understood it to mean productive relationships of employee (staff) with employers (management at Anglia Ruskin). It seems I was wrong!’ (female, experienced, academic).

Non-Standard Understandings

A number of respondents did not understand the concept of employer engagement in the way that it is used by universities or government. For example, one respondent defined the concept as ‘employers who engage with their employees’ (female, experienced, academic). As in the extract above, a number of
respondents understood employer engagement to be about the universities' role as an employer and its
duty of care and engagement with its (the University's) employees. This perception can be seen in the
following extract, which defines employer engagement as 'management engaging staff with decisions
relating to the department I work in and the future of our University' (female, experienced, non-academic).
Indeed, this misunderstanding of the concept was shared by non-academic and academic staff alike:
'Working with colleagues and engaging with the University generally' (female, experienced, academic).
This perception of employer engagement was sometimes focused on a very specific aspect of the
University's relationship with its employees: 'Being able to approach and ask for guidance from your
employer and receiving the necessary support from them' (female, early career, non-academic).
In addition to this pattern of non-standard interpretations of the concept of employer engagement, there
were two respondents who indicated outright resistance to it. One respondent said the concept means
'very little' (male, experienced, academic). Another respondent described the concept as a 'crap term –
means nothing at all!' (male, experienced, academic). Such outright resistance to the concept must also
be taken into account by universities.

Broad Definitions
Amongst those who were able to offer a definition of employer engagement, some described the concept
in broad terms, which generally correspond with the University and government definitions. At its most
broad, employer engagement was defined as 'Engaging with employers both locally, regionally and
nationally to gain a positive perception of staff' and 'any action that engages with an external
organisation' (male, experienced, non-academic) and 'Liaising and linking with stakeholders and
others' (female, experienced, academic). One respondent defined employer engagement as 'Liaising with
businesses and potential employers to create links and establish symbiotic relationships (male, early
career, non-academic). Another respondent's definition focuses more specifically on 'research and
teaching', 'Working with employers to develop teaching and research opportunities that meet the needs of
our students and industry' (male, early career, academic).

Narrow Definitions
Some respondents defined employer engagement in more specific and restrictive ways, which
nevertheless show a detailed understanding of the concept. The following example takes a specific
position, valuing particular forms of employer engagement.

“I would expect guest speakers from the business community, possibly joint projects with other
countries. I would expect knowledge to be utilised by letting students do work placements in local
businesses. There should be more KTPs [knowledge transfer partnerships] organised.”
(female, early career, non-academic)

The following extract also focuses on one form of employer engagement (delivering accredited modules in
particular workplaces).

“Delivering HE courses to employed people at their place of employment. This involves tailoring
courses to meet employer requirements whilst maintaining academic rigour.”
(male, experienced, academic)

As in the prior example, the above extract only addresses one small aspect of employer engagement, but
shows a detailed understanding of that aspect.

While some respondents displayed a detailed understanding of a specific element of employer
engagement in their narrowly framed definition, others hazarded guesses while acknowledging a degree of
ignorance on the topic.
“Not really sure exactly, but I believe it refers to academic research that has immediate applications or relevance in a business context.”

(female, experienced, academic).

Overall, a considerable number of respondents focused on one aspect of employer engagement to the exclusion of others. A key problem raised by this category of responses is that certain aspects of employer engagement are left out of view. For example, the respondent who defined employer engagement as ‘offer[ing] advice to businesses’ (female, experienced, non-academic) might not attend to opportunities for ideas from businesses to contribute to the University curriculum. Likewise, another respondent only focused on employer engagement as denoting ‘satisfying employers’ needs’ (male, experienced, academic), which obscures from view the ways in which employers can contribute to the needs of universities. At the same time, a definition that only focuses on how employers can contribute to the University’s curriculum ignores the many ways in which employers can benefit from universities’ input. This can be seen in the following extract: ‘working with those who are able to offer workplace access prior, during or post tertiary education’ (female, experienced, academic). Thus, it is important for universities to promote an inclusive definition of employer engagement that highlights the reciprocal and dialogical potential of such engagement.

Discussion

The term ‘employer engagement’ is used throughout the Anglia Ruskin University corporate plan. But how well is this concept actually understood by University staff expected to carry it out? This study indicates that there is a substantial level of uncertainty, self-reported ignorance, incomplete understandings and even outright resistance to the concept of employer engagement. Moreover, only a minority of respondents felt they understood the context around calls for employer engagement. On the positive side, a slim majority of respondents were able to offer a definition that accurately accounted for at least one aspect of employer engagement at some level. Also, a clear majority of respondents had some prior experience with employer engagement. However, the lack of shared understanding around this concept comprises a significant barrier to its adoption by University staff.

As I have argued elsewhere (Jensen & Wagoner, 2009), representations at the policy level must be interpreted and translated into practical representations that can guide action by particular professional staff in order to achieve social or cultural change. If, as this study indicates, individual staff members have either not understood the University or government representations of employer engagement or have focused on one particular aspect of it to the exclusion of other aspects, this will prevent the development of a comprehensive norm of employer engagement at all levels of University practice, as envisioned by the Anglia Ruskin University corporate plan and government higher education policy. This research clearly demonstrates that there is a base of experience from which to build enhanced employer engagement, if the right incentives and communication strategies are adopted.

References
