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London is a truly global city of immense prosperity. This prosperity is founded on its openness and dynamic businesses, world leading in many sectors such as the creative industries and finance.

In the modern global economy, maintaining and boosting this prosperity is increasingly reliant on a flexible base of high skills. This makes it essential that London’s skills system and employers are able to work together to meet the capital’s current and future skills needs.

At the same time, too many Londoners’ miss out on the opportunities the city offers, held back by a lack of skills. Global economic changes are raising the bar to employment opportunity, with far fewer jobs open to those with low or no qualifications. So ensuring that Londoners have the skills employers need is essential to fairness and inclusion, as well as economic prosperity.

To deliver this matching function is challenging in practice. This report looks at how Further Education is rising to this challenge. It finds a great willingness among both providers and employers to engage, and some striking examples of best practice. There is much to be proud of, at provider level, working with individual local employers, and London level, working to boost the number of Apprenticeships.

However, there is much still to do. In particular, our report proposes a focus on:

- **What works network**: Best practice is not uniform, and there is a London-wide role in promoting this;
- **Sector Clusters**: There is a need for greater collaboration among providers working with employers in a particular sector – we propose the trialling of Sector Clusters to deliver this; and
- **College support**: Drawing together support from the range of bodies involved could provide a programme of support to further build the employer engagement capacity of providers.

London is a global success story. Better meeting employers skills needs is key to delivering even greater prosperity and ensuring all Londoners can share in it.

**Stephen Evans**  
Deputy Chief Executive (Development and Research)  
NIACE
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of a research study that provides a snapshot of Further Education (FE) colleges’ employer engagement in London. Employer engagement involves colleges and employers working together in partnership. The focus can be wide ranging but tends to be on stimulating demand for skills development and training; Apprenticeships and work based training; and developing bespoke courses, qualifications and delivery.

The Greater London Authority commissioned the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE - The National Voice for Lifelong Learning) to undertake the study. We are an internationally respected development organisation and think-tank, working on issues central to the economic renewal of the UK, particularly in the political economy, education and learning, public policy and regeneration fields. We campaign for the personal, social and economic benefits from lifelong learning; work to improve people’s experience of the adult learning and skills system; and fight for all adults to have opportunities throughout their lives to participate in and benefit from learning.

It is clear that some FE colleges have successful employer engagement strategies and practices. However, employers and wider stakeholders identify opportunities to address challenges and further improve employer engagement.

Overall, it has been a challenge for some of the colleges to adopt new ways of working and develop improved employer engagement. In many cases, colleges are learning as they go along but are developing a more sophisticated approach overtime focusing on whole college strategies and plans. Engaging and working with SMEs remains a challenge due to the number and diversity of the many SMEs in a local area. SMEs are less likely to have a strategic approach to skills development and colleges have found this a resource intensive relationship to develop.

There is evidence of good practice but the research also identifies ‘untapped’ opportunities to build employer engagement. One example is college governors. Whilst some FE colleges fully involve governors in employer engagement, in other colleges, governors are not active or have limited impact.

Colleges and wider stakeholders see further opportunities to strategically collaborate and develop a pan-sector approach. Such an approach would, in effect, achieve economies of scale and present opportunities for FE colleges to be seen as one group of organisations. It also presents the potential for specialisation in specific sectors or delivery methods.
Both the college and employer respondents highlighted the importance of the skills and abilities of college staff, leaders and governors. This remains central to delivering successful employer engagement.

The evidence from FE colleges, employers and wider stakeholders identifies a number of recommendations for the Greater London Authority (GLA) and London Enterprise Panel (LEP) to address some of the remaining challenges to effective employer engagement.

**Strategic**

- There is a continuing need and role for the GLA and LEP to focus on and address the nature of employer engagement on an ongoing basis. There is potential for this to be externally commissioned as part of a systematic Skills Strategy review process.
- There is a need for a joined-up, co-ordinated approach through a central body that is widely known, informed by an understanding of employer demand and economic trends shaped by the LEP.
- A system of peer support is required for colleges to help develop an employer engagement strategy or further improve an existing employer engagement strategy.

**Co-operation**

- Develop sector based ‘engagement’ clusters for SMEs to come together to build understanding and practice. Develop a facilitated pilot in a key growth sector or locality.
- Facilitate the sharing of good practice across the sector through case studies, events, ‘master classes’, visits to colleges and relevant promotional material.
- Facilitate employer representatives and sectors bodies working with colleges to challenge employers to consider future skills needs and stimulate demand.
- Engage and influence the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) to support college staff to build professional development on employer engagement.

**Best Practice**

- Build on and share the best practice of using employer skills training needs analysis to identify and build relationships with new employers.
- Focus on role of college Governors. Promote and encourage local business people on to the board of governors. There is the potential to use a similar model to school governors. Use the potential offered by Governors contacts and networks to maximize understanding of skills development.
INTRODUCTION AND EVIDENCE REVIEW

The research study provides a snapshot of FE colleges’ employer engagement in London. NIACE undertook the study between June and August 2014. It includes: a brief evidence review; an online survey of FE colleges; qualitative interviews with FE colleges and employers; as well as evidence from wider stakeholders. Good practice case studies were developed to inform FE colleges’ employer engagement. These can be found in the separate case study report.

The main objectives of the research study were to:

- Present a picture of employer engagement across the capital based on the findings of survey research with London FE colleges.
- Present a range of good practice through in-depth work with a sample of colleges identified from survey responses.
- Capture employer perspectives of engagement with the skills system, what works well and what areas there are for improvement via telephone interviews with a sample of employers.
- To consult with wider stakeholders to gather views on college and employer engagement, especially barriers, challenges and evidence of good practice.

Evidence Review

London is a global city that is leading the way in financial services, creative industries, science and technological activities. It is the driving force of economic growth for the UK. Forecasts indicate that London’s position will strengthen as the population grows up to 8.6 million people by 2016. Despite the successes, London also faces a number of persistent challenges. There are significant pockets of deprivation, worklessness and economic underperformance juxtaposed with highly successful, agile and profitable labour markets.

The unique nature of London within the UK and European context, contributes to the importance of ensuring that the learning and skills sector is successfully engaging with employers, including small and medium enterprises (SMEs). London has high levels of unemployment and traditionally has lower Apprenticeship participation levels than the rest of the country. The role of SMEs, especially micro businesses, is vital to the successful functioning of the London economy as they account for 99.8 per cent of businesses in the capital and nearly 50 per cent (2.3 million people) of employment. Evidence from the UK Commission’s Employer Skills Survey (2013) shows nationally an increase in skills shortage vacancies which has the potential to slow economic recovery. The London Business Survey (2014) shows that nearly two thirds (62%) of businesses in London plan to recruit this year. However, almost half

2 Business population e for UK and regions: 2013 statistical release, BIS.
3 UK Commission’s Employer Skills Survey: UK results 2013, UKCES.
(45%) report that not all staff have the right skills for the job. The demand for higher level skills is growing in all industries and in all job roles from business leaders and managers to the wider workforce. Such skills are fundamental to a successful economy. Technology is also transforming the workplace but many individuals and businesses lack the necessary digital skills.

Significant reform and change is taking place within the Further Education and skills sector. At the centre of this reform is the role of employers in the skills system. It is essential that skills provision and delivery are shaped by and meet local employer needs. As a result employers have an expanding role to play working in partnership with colleges and training providers. Apprenticeships, in particular, are a core element of government policy designed to develop the skills of the workforce. New approaches to Apprenticeships are being tested through the Trailblazer pilots and employers are leading these developments. Skills funding is also increasingly being put in the hands of partnerships led by employers.

LEPs, Chambers of Commerce and employers are firmly in the driving seat, with direct powers over local economic strategy, funding, delivery, and future developments. Business influence will grow further, as City Deals and Local Growth Bids take shape. New public funding will require multiple sponsors, including employers which will put relationships between colleges and employers centre stage.

Recommendations from the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning report (CAVTL, 2013) promise new exploratory avenues for employers, including measures to reinstate employers’ presence and influence across providers of vocational skills, and genuine ‘two-way’ collaboration between colleges, training providers and employers.

Employers feel there has been significant improvement in the relevance of FE college courses (with satisfaction amongst business up from 52% in 2012 to 61% in 2013). There is evidence of strong FE college employer engagement between specific colleges and specific employers but this is not widespread across London. Overall, only 7% of employers in London use FE colleges as an external training source. For those employers who currently provide training this rises to 9% of employers. For the employers who use FE colleges, the majority of the funding is provided by the employer or co-funded by the FE college and employer. For the majority of employers who do not use an FE college the reasons are that the FE courses are not relevant (46%); 8% do not know enough about the courses; 6% feel the courses are poor quality; 6% feel the courses are too expensive; and 4% feel the start dates/times are too inflexible. This highlights some challenges for FE colleges to improve employer engagement further.

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6 Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning (2013) It’s About Work... Excellent Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning. Learning and Skills Improvement Service, Coventry.
7 Changing the Pace (2013), CBI/Pearson education and skills survey. CBI 2013.
Evidence also highlights the low take up of Apprenticeships in London. Just 12% of employers offer or have Apprenticeships which is the lowest regional figure in England. In order to address the low number of Apprenticeships and as a response to the increasing demand for Apprenticeships by young people, the London Apprenticeship Campaign was introduced in 2010 by the GLA and the National Apprenticeship Service.

Successful colleges recognise that developing effective employer engagement is essential to meet the local skill needs and create a productive workforce. Evidence from a study by the 157 group highlights several key factors to developing effective employer engagement which includes:

- A clear purpose and role for the college in economic community;
- Creating college ‘advocates’ in key local employers and stakeholders;
- Build credibility; and,
- Talking business language.

Recent research from Ofsted highlights pockets of good practice that exist in relation to employer engagement, but also recognises that there are opportunities to further develop practice. Ofsted also identifies that more evaluation and impact assessment activity by FE colleges is needed. In a small number of FE colleges learner destinations and wider outcomes, such as progression into sustainable employment are unknown. Some curriculum areas engage well with local employers but this is not systematic across all provision.

The wider evidence on FE college employer engagement presents a mixed picture. There are colleges that demonstrate good practice but also challenges and opportunities for further improvement.

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This two-month study involves a mixed methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data. Prior to the primary research, an initial part of the study was to review the wider evidence on FE colleges’ employer engagement. The study includes: an online survey of FE colleges in London; evidence from wider stakeholders; and qualitative telephone interviews with ten colleges; and telephone interviews with employers.

The online survey was aimed at Principals, Directors for Business Development and/or Employer Engagement managers. The survey was designed to capture a snapshot of FE colleges’ engagement with employers. In total 15 colleges responded to the survey.

From the online survey responses 10 FE colleges were invited to participate in qualitative telephone interviews. A total of seven qualitative interviews with colleges were completed. Some of the interviews included a number of different college staff to provide a fuller response and address different perspectives. The qualitative data from the telephone interviews was thematically analysed and is reported in the findings section. It is also used to develop case studies and identify critical success factors for employer engagement.

The FE colleges provided the contact details for one or two employers they work with and who could input into the case studies of successful practice. A thematic analysis of the data from the three employer interviews is presented in the findings section. Qualitative information from the employers is incorporated in the individual case studies.

Wider stakeholders were also approached and invited to contribute to the study. This included the Federation of Small Business; the Association of Colleges; the CBI; and London First. Information was provided through an online survey, telephone interviews and written responses. The data was thematically analysed and is presented in the wider stakeholders section.

Further details on the methodology and the fieldwork materials can be found in the Appendices.
This section of the report outlines the key findings. Firstly it presents the findings from the online survey of FE; followed by the findings from the qualitative interviews with colleges and employers. The final section presents evidence from wider stakeholders.

**COLLEGE SURVEY**

Nearly all the respondents are from general further education colleges (14) and one is from a Specialist Designated Institute (SDI). Eight of the colleges are based in outer London and five based in inner London. Two colleges cover both outer and inner London. Eleven of the colleges enrol between 5,001 and 20,000 students. A further three colleges enrol between 1,001 and 5,000 students and one college enrols over 20,000 students.

In order to meet local skills needs all of the respondents (15) directly consult with employers. The number of employers that colleges consult varies between 20 and 1,500. Nearly all of the respondents work most frequently with small employers who employ less than 49 employees. Only 5 of the colleges work with very large employers (1,000 or more employees).

The sector subject area in which colleges work with employers is detailed in figure 1. It is noticeable that colleges work with employers across a range of subject area sectors. As might be expected there is a prevalence of: Business, Administration and Law (13); Retail and Commercial Enterprise (13); Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies (12); Construction, Planning and the Built Environment (11); and, Information and Communication Technology (11). Only one college focuses on land based subjects such as agriculture.
Figure 1: Sector subject area in which colleges work with employers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Area</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business, Administration and Law</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail and Commercial Enterprise</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction, Planning and the Built Environment</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information and Communication Technology</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and Training</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation for Life and Work</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and Mathematics</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure, Travel and Tourism</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts, Media and Publishing</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages, Literature and Culture</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History, Philosophy and Theology</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: 15 respondents
(multiple response possible)

In the main, colleges work with employers on Apprenticeships, work experience opportunities and pre-employment skills. Table 1 below outlines the detailed responses. The ‘other’ responses include: to offer progression opportunities for students; partnership working; commercial up-skilling of staff; and to offer bespoke training.

Table 1: Reasons why colleges work with employers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apprenticeships</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Experience opportunities</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-employment skills provision</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other work-based learning</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traineeships</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: 15 respondents
(multiple responses possible)

Table 2 (overleaf) details the main organisations and networks that FE colleges work with to meet local employer skills needs. All of the colleges work with local authorities (15), all but one works with the local Jobcentre Plus (14) and 13 work with the Chamber of Commerce. Six colleges work with Federation of Small Business.
Table 2: Organisations colleges work with

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local authorities</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobcentre Plus</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chamber of Commerce</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Enterprise Panels</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Programme providers</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federation of Small Businesses</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: 15 respondents
(multiple responses possible)

Respondents were asked to provide details of the processes and mechanisms used to consult with employers. This included:
- Forums;
- Employer groups;
- Networking events; and,
- One-to-one meetings with employers.

College Governance and Employer Engagement Activities

The number of governors at each FE college varies between 10 and 18. As shown in table 3 below the number of employer representatives on the board of college governors varies between 2 and 12.

Table 3: Employer governors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number employer governors</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 to 3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 to 6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 to 9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 to 13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: 15 respondents

Figure 3 overleaf shows that over half of respondents (8) felt their college governors are quite active in facilitating employer engagement and two felt governors are very active. Five respondents said that their college governors are not very active in employer engagement.
Figure 3: Extent of college governor activity in facilitating employer engagement

![Bar chart showing the extent of college governor activity in facilitating employer engagement.]

**Base:** 15 respondents

Figure 4 shows that over half of respondents (8) said that their college governors have a moderate impact on the success of employer engagement. Two respondents said that college governors have a high impact. However, four said their college governors have a low impact and one respondent said they have no impact.

**Figure 4: Level of impact governors have on success of employer engagement activities**

![Bar chart showing the level of impact governors have on success of employer engagement activities.]

Base: 15 respondents

Respondents were asked to outline some of the activities that their governors undertook to support the college’s employer engagement, these include:
- Representing the college at events;
- Employing apprentices, trainees or provide work experience;
- Through their networks; and,
- Monitoring college’s performance against their employer engagement strategy.
College Employer Engagement Strategy

Twelve respondents said their college has a formal strategy for employer engagement but a further three do not have a formal strategy. Twelve respondents use local labour market statistics to inform the college’s employer engagement strategy and three do not use such labour market information. A number of different individuals at a number of levels within the FE colleges are responsible for employer engagement. This includes:

- Principal;
- Vice Principal;
- Assistant Principal Enterprise;
- Chief Operating Officer of our Employer facing company;
- Director of Business / Director Enterprise and Development;
- Directors of Curriculum;
- Head of Employer and Partnership Development; and,
- The Senior Leadership Team.

Overall the aims of the employer engagement strategies are to:

- Create more employment opportunities;
- Respond to employer demands for skills;
- Sell training and products to employers; and,
- Target priority students.

Key Challenges for Employer Engagement

All of the FE colleges identified challenges when working with employers, including:

- Engaging successfully with Small-to-Medium Enterprises (SMEs);
- Competition with private providers;
- Competition with other colleges;
- A lack of flexible funding to meet specific employer needs;
- Employers uncertainty about the role of colleges and how to contact;
- A lack of understanding of detailed employers training/skills needs;
- Employer perception of too much administration involved;
- Lack of time to build sustainable relationships; and,
- Hidden or unexpected costs for employers.

Successful Employer Engagement

Three respondents felt the college’s employer engagement was very successful. Twelve respondents felt it was quite successful but there was scope for improvement. None of the respondents felt that employer engagement was unsuccessful. Some FE colleges monitor and evaluate the success of employer engagement activities through a variety of methods including: survey and consultations; target setting and performance reviews; and the monitoring of repeat business and referrals.

Colleges saw the following as key success factors for employer engagement:

- Taking a whole college approach to engaging employers;
- Adopting a creative / innovative approach;
- Not simply doing what always has been done;
- Having specialist teams / individuals;
- Understanding local employer skills needs;
- Working close with key stakeholders;
- Having employer advocates to communicate offer to wider networks; and,
- Having flexibility to deliver a bespoke service.

Twelve respondents said that their college shared good employer engagement practices across the whole college but one respondent said this did not happen. Three respondents did not know. Similarly, ten respondents said that their college shared good employer engagement practices more widely with other colleges. Whereas five indicated that this did not take place. This highlights an opportunity for wider networking and sharing of good practice.

To support employer engagement further FE colleges feel they would benefit from external support to:
- Promote colleges to employers more widely;
- Improve access to employer networks;
- Professional support and training for college staff in working with/understanding employers;
- Develop more relevant/up to date models of employer engagement; and,
- Additional funding, for example to provide resources to build networks and attend stakeholder meetings.
FE COLLEGE QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

The qualitative telephone interviews with FE colleges built on the survey responses and explored their views in more detail as well as and specific examples of employer engagement. The colleges interviewed are not representative of all colleges across London but are ones that have successful employer engagement practice. The interviews involved a range of college staff including: the Principal or Vice-Principal; Directors of Employer Engagement; Business Development Managers or Enterprise Managers. For each college more than one member of staff covering different roles was usually interviewed. The key findings including the challenges faced by colleges are summarised below.

A new approach, culture and values

An overarching theme from the interviews is that these colleges work closely with employers. Respondents felt they are now more responsive to employers needs than previously. One college said that they ‘want to become the ‘one stop shop’ for employers’. A key part of meeting employer demands is greater flexibility in approach. This includes developing and delivering flexible models of training to better meet employers’ requirements. For example, training that fits around a working day; is delivered on site; and is tailored appropriately for the employees. It is also critical to deliver training to the employers’ timescales rather than the annual (September to July) college timetable. Respondents felt it is much more usual to develop and deliver customised training than previously. The college staff said this involves working more closely with the employer, being professional at every stage, and maintaining regular and good communication with the employers:

‘As a college we’ve been very good at interpreting and helping employers to understand what their needs are and putting a programme together to help meet them.’

‘A kind of critical friend. This then builds trust through sound advice and support for their businesses.’

The importance of adopting new values across the college that are business-like and reflect how businesses operate is seen as a necessity. This includes being enterprising and entrepreneurial; being responsive and innovative; building business to business relationships; having a culture of managed risk; and a whole college approach to looking for business opportunities:

‘Establishing a set of business values that drive the staff behaviour. Having staff that take a holistic and targeted approach and the best solution for the employer’

College staff identify that a holistic approach across the college provides the best solution for the employer. It is important that an employer engagement strategy is applied across the college. In this way, staff across the college understand the approach and their role:

‘We didn’t want to actually create a separate (employer engagement) team. By doing that you’re sending out a message that it is something separate. What we’re
trying to do is to say this is everybody’s responsibility. The expectation and the hope is that everybody will see it as part of their responsibility.’

For FE colleges, introducing a new culture and values had not been without challenges. It has been a slow and determined process to develop a more proactive and externally facing approach. One college took five years to develop a holistic approach and focus on the best solution for the employer. There was a view that a lot of FE colleges remain quite traditional in their approach and culture. But that change must start here:

‘Employers don’t come to us; we have to go to them. So we definitely have to be outward facing’.

**A clear strategy**

Having a clear strategy is critical to establishing successful, long term employer engagement. One respondent stated that it is vital to have the support of the College Executive Team to provide the resources and infrastructure required. A successful approach involves senior college management creating a culture and vision of growth. This includes identifying new business opportunities and taking a business-like approach to employer engagement. Some of the colleges have dedicated business development teams who identify and create new business leads. However, employer engagement strategies require regular updating and reviewing as the local area and economy changes:

‘The college has been reviewing its employer engagement strategy looking at what we’re doing, what’s working and then completely trying to refocus and re-energise it. Since August we’ve probably re-engaged with something like 450 different SMEs which has been fantastic.’

One college highlighted the impact of a lack of a clear strategy for employer engagement. In this case the Business Event team booked appointments with employers and did not confirm the appointment before someone attended:

‘That’s where it fell down really because obviously the employer’s number one priority is about keeping their business going and bringing in income not us.’

**Understanding Employers**

Information is a crucial foundation for employer engagement activities. All the respondents stated the importance of having their ‘*finger on the pulse*’ and being able to react to the changing demands of employers. Colleges need up to date information to help them respond to employers by building a reliable and detailed picture of local employer skills needs. Colleges use a number of external sources of local labour market intelligence to forecast future demands. Local data sources include: employment and unemployment data; Jobcentre Plus statistics; DWP data and Chamber of Commerce business data.
‘Responding quickly to this data stream and turning the intelligence into action is key – being able to quickly respond to those opportunities and put things in place straight away and that’s the key to it’.

One college uses the employer training needs analysis regularly produced by the sales team as a source of information to help influence the employer engagement strategy. An important component identified by several respondents is a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system which tracks engagement with individual employers and provides routine monthly or quarterly analysis:

‘This approach identifies gaps in the market and areas, sectors or employers to target.’

A key challenge for all the colleges is understanding and keeping up to date with employers. It is resource intensive and requires a new way of working. College staff must have the skills and knowledge to think and operate like a business. The college must adopt ‘employer facing’ business models and adapt the current infrastructure and information systems to meet these requirements:

‘We adapted our learner based systems to employer as client based systems.’

**College Governors**

College governors can contribute to successful employer engagement. As highlighted in the earlier survey findings some governors are active in facilitating employer engagement, whereas others are less so. Colleges felt there should be more encouragement of governors to be directly involved in college employer engagement. Many college governors are part of wider networks and involved in additional management committees which present opportunities to represent the college. The Governors role tends to be supportive in developing wider relationships with business, identifying opportunities and promoting the college and the students:

‘We have good links with employers through our governors. A number of governors are employers in their own right and have links to a number of other businesses. You’re able to tap into governors support networks.’

Employer governors are important for colleges. Their activities include representing the college at events, employing Apprentices and using local employer networks, such as the Chamber to promote the college. Effective employer governors use their contacts to widen the reach of the college and facilitate meetings with local business leaders such as Directors and Chief Executives. This was seen by one college as a useful way to engage with employers and develop a more business-like approach. Employer governors have a key role in driving change in employer engagement through the senior management team. Overall, it is challenging for college staff to understand a commercial, business approach but working with employer governors ‘helps understand how business really works.’

‘Employer governors are helpful in terms of presenting in a more business like way and forming greater links.’
Creating partnerships

There are two types of partnerships that are necessary for successful employer engagement. Firstly, partnerships across the Further Education sector with other colleges and training providers to present a unified approach to training and skills development; secondly, collaborative partnerships with employers to deliver the ‘right’ training or skills development.

All the colleges work in partnership with wider networks, organisations and commercial companies to develop ‘joined-up’ effective employer engagement. Collaborative working is a key route to help engage with employers more effectively:

‘In my view I think you achieve so much more by working in partnership and I think you come across as being stronger, one voice and you're much more consistent. Then each college has an ambassador that works with all the different projects that represents all the college interests’.

A number of different collaborative partnerships are central to colleges’ employer engagement strategy. Such partnerships develop for different reasons and usually lead to further business opportunities. Partnerships are built around neighbourhood regeneration schemes and infrastructure projects, such as the Olympics. One college is currently working with the local borough council, Jobcentre Plus and a large employer recruiting for a new development. The college delivers skills training as part of a pre-employment package for unemployed local residents.

Some partnerships and consortia develop around specific commercial bids to deliver training and skills development. For example, the London Capital Colleges consortium offering maths and English training through a £4.6 million pan-London bid.

One college works in partnership with the Technician Apprenticeship Consortium to develop a civil engineering apprenticeship framework. The consortium partners meet on a quarterly basis. An employer attends the consortium meeting and talks about their apprenticeships which includes future requirements.

Another aspect of partnership working is the establishment of strong partnerships with employers. Such relationships take time to build and in many cases colleges have to overcome misinformation or low expectations. Good personal relationships and developing trust in the partnerships is important for continued success:

‘People do business with people, not organisation to organisation. It’s a personal relationship that you develop. Those relationships need to be built on trust.’

In one college:

‘Employers are invited to participate and represent their sector to staff and students in a particular curriculum area. This engages the employer in a very positive way and fosters a closer working relationship’.

A strong message from the evidence is the necessity to build effective working relationships with employers. For some employers this involves the college helping
the employer to identify their business objectives and understand the skills development required to move their business forward:

‘Most SMEs don’t have business plans. If they haven’t got business plans how on earth are they going to identify what skills or training or stuff they need for the future. That’s where we need to be to support them.’

The challenge for colleges is to develop long term sustainable relationships with a significant number of employers. As the majority of employers are SMEs, in the short term this can take up significant college staff resources. However, these relationships need to be viewed for the long term. One solution could be to create SME clusters that bring together groups of SMEs to develop scalable relationships:

‘SMEs take up too much time, present too much risk, cost more and can present more hassle as they do not know what they want.’

For Colleges building but especially maintaining a reputation/credibility takes a large amount of resource:

‘It is hard to get out onto the ground, to do Chamber of Commerce meetings, to do council meetings, to do small business meetings. They are important to really understand what needs are and to be able to cut through lots of the stuff to the specifics of small employers and employees but… I have a small business development team.’

**A clearly focused training/skills development offer**

For effective employer engagement the college must provide focused and appropriate training and skills development. This includes involving employers to design appropriate content which makes it more useful for the learner in relation to specific roles. It also enhances the experience for the employer. Such tailored and focused learning develops more proficient and skilled learners who are able to undertake specific job roles.

Matching up the training or curriculum offered by the college to the exact needs of each employer is difficult. One respondent felt that ‘employers need to be clearer about their skill needs and expectations’. Another respondent suggested that it would be good to know more about the specific skill requirements of some of the jobs advertised. In this way colleges could better match skills provision and provide appropriate training/course content. One college took a collaborative approach to working with the employer through developing and agreeing course information and schemes of work. The training programme was better aligned to the employer needs but it was a very resource intensive approach:

‘It’s been a long hard slog because curriculums tend to be less flexible and more geared around well this is what we do… those behaviours and attitudes are quite entrenched and quite hard to change.’

Employer endorsement and involvement in training is important to colleges. College staff said it is important to get employers to visit colleges, to see the courses and
training delivered and provide advice on the relevance of courses. Some colleges secure this involvement more effectively than others:

‘It’s been invaluable having employers come into the college and give us advice and guidance on how to set up aspects of our training.’

‘If we can get one of the big contracting companies into our college and help us put together an industry standard training course this would actually revolutionise .... the way we were viewed by the potential student population. This could make a massive difference to us.’

Some college staff feel that it is hard to engage with employers. Employers have businesses to run and competing demands on their time. It can be a challenge to know where to start:

‘It would be good to get the employer involved at a higher level, engaging with the curriculum and coming into the College as well as talk to the students.’

‘The big companies all say the right things about supporting education, training and local employment, but trying to get them to advise on what types of course to put on that might enable some of our students to apply for some of the jobs that they’ve got advertised - it’s very difficult.’

A learning curve
It has been a challenge for colleges to adopt new ways of working and develop better employer engagement. Colleges are learning as they go along, through trialing new approaches, testing them out, keeping the approaches that work and discarding the ones that are not successful. Some colleges are proactive in their employer engagement whereas other colleges are more reactive. The successful colleges have become more sophisticated in their approaches to employer engagement over time. One college felt that:

‘It’s taken a lot of work to get off the ground because it’s something that we haven’t done before’.

‘Perseverance is needed. Breaking down entrenched behaviours and attitudes internally as well as externally to make this happen and get it off the ground. Identifying the benefits and sharing the successes to motivate and accelerate progress.’

New opportunities
Some respondents noted that taking a new approach to employer engagement, being more strategic and working in partnership leads to new business opportunities. Working with just one new employer can result in multiple new contacts, new business opportunities and the creation of new re-useable resources. For example, one College found that working with one employer as part of a recruitment exercise created further opportunities to deliver training to an additional group of employees. A new training resource developed as part of this work created a further opportunity
to re-use it with a different employer. The mechanism of partnership working and joint funding proposals expands the colleges reach to a wider group of businesses:

‘Having good positive experiences and then selling more by word of mouth has helped us to win many more contracts. Some employers have come to us. So I would say 60 per cent we will go out but 40 per cent they call us because of our reputation now.’

**Key Challenges**
Throughout the interviews a number of key challenges to successful employer engagement emerge. The main ones are:

- Building a holistic approach across the college;
- Understanding employers and their skill needs;
- Creating a flexible, bespoke service to meet employer needs;
- Building relationships/partnerships with employers and wider stakeholders;
- Engaging college governors;
- Developing a systematic, structured approach to employer engagement; and,
- Learning from and sharing good practice.

**Key Factors for success**
FE colleges suggested a number of factors that led to successful employer engagement. These are listed below:

- Establishing a business-like approach. Think like a business, act like a business and speak like a business.
- Listen to employers and work in partnership with them.
- Have a clear vision and strategic plan in place. Adopt a holistic approach across the college to engage with employers.
- Build partnerships across the Further Education and skills sector to develop a joined-up approach with other colleges and providers.
- Work with relevant sector and employer bodies.
- Meet the employers’ expectations and needs. Remember that the employer wants the right person with the right skills.
- Use Governors to advance the reputation of the college and access new networks.
- Deliver a flexible, bespoke service with innovative delivery models.
- Remain positive and outward looking to maximise all opportunities for new business and partnerships.
EMPLOYER QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

The employer interviews collected qualitative data and provided an additional perspective to the college interviews. The employers interviewed represented large and small sized businesses across the wholesale, retail and motor manufacturing sectors. The following key themes emerge: Experience of working with FE colleges; building relationships; understanding business; delivery; business benefits; and improvements. The main findings are summarised below.

Experience of working with FE Colleges
In general, the employers did not fully understand FE colleges nor the range of services and training provided. The world of further education came across as one of funding restrictions, changing government policy, changing qualifications and regulations. This is ‘confusing and off putting’ when trying to work with colleges. A couple of SMEs challenged the government approach to employers:

‘I’m not a job creation scheme. We are a business, we have to make a profit, it is as simple as that. The government constantly pushing SMEs to provide job opportunities, that’s not what they should do. They should create an environment and a landscape where SMEs feel comfortable and confident to take people off the unemployment register and we’re not a government employment scheme.’

Employers felt that part of college’s role was to ‘hide the wiring’. Employers did not need to know how the FE sector worked, they just needed a skilled individual to do a job:

‘It is just about keeping it simple, the more… can do to take away the barriers and not show the wires then the more likely employers are to engage.’

Where employers had not worked with FE colleges previously they tended to be initially skeptical about the service they would receive. Overall, such employers also had low expectations in relation to the appropriateness and quality of the training/service:

‘We were initially skeptical, concerned but the service exceeded our expectations.’

Employers who had little engagement with FE colleges found it hard to identify a route in or contact point. This involved viewing the website, telephone contact, contact with marketing teams, but what was needed was direct contact with the same named individual:

‘It’s confusing, all those rules and programmes… I just want to recruit skilled people.’

Building Relationships
The employers who worked with FE colleges had established good working relations but this is not universal for all employers. This good practice starts by building an effective working relationship between key individuals in the college and at the business. This relationship forms the basis for all other and future activities. It is a critical factor for employer engagement.
Such working relationships do not always begin directly with the college. Employers come across colleges in a number of different ways including recruitment, training the workforce, through other partners and wider publicity. One employer developed a partnership with the local college through a large scale recruitment exercise as part of a regeneration programme in the local area. The college was part of the partnership bidding to deliver the recruitment exercise, specifically the training for a guaranteed interview:

‘We worked with Resources Plus and their partners, that’s when the College became involved to supply the training prior to a guaranteed interview.’

Respondents recognise the changing focus to the relationship with colleges as it becomes more employer driven. There remains scope for further improvement of the contacts and relationships. One employer felt that colleges need to listen more to employers and adopt an employer focus:

‘Seek out the employers needs without complicating the picture with funding rules and jargon around frameworks.’

Employers who work with FE colleges can see the benefits and strengths of this relationship. In some cases the local college exceeded the employers’ initial expectations which in turn ‘raised the benchmark/expectations for future work with colleges’. Such employers valued the colleges approach and the training provided:

‘The college helped enable our staff to progress through our company and build confidence with our employees to tackle issues through their training. We couldn’t do this kind of thing on our own.’

Overall the employers who worked with college staff feel they are professional and deliver training/courses to a very high standard. The employers were clear that there was no room for complacency in the relationship with colleges. Colleges had to remain focused on understanding employers, their needs and delivering what was required:

‘The relationship must be built on meeting the employer need and not meeting college targets.’

**Understanding business**

Having an up to date and relevant understanding of employers was a constant challenge for all the colleges. For colleges, it takes significant resource to build up and maintain this expertise. Employer respondents felt that working with colleges was most effective when a college understood the employer needs and their business. Employers stated that the colleges that took time to understand their businesses, to listen, to understand exactly what was required and applied this to the training delivered. One employer commented that the college was innovative in their approach and exceeded their expectations:

‘The college took time to really understand our business and applied this to the training. We definitely got a quality candidate not just a quantity job and this is demonstrated in a tangible positive impact on the business.’
Employers understood the challenge for colleges to understand the local economy, the business needs and the demands of the labour market. However, employers saw it as an essential part of the college’s role. One employer commented that colleges must be effective at networking, getting out into the locality and understanding the employer requirements. Employers recognise it is resource intensive but they also say it important for colleges to understand business needs, translate this into the bigger picture for training requirements and make the connection to the local area needs. One employer commented:

‘There’s no magic bullet here. The landscape is varied and dynamic and good local intelligence and knowing what is going on the ground is very important.’

Overall, employers wanted colleges to see them as a business and not just an opportunity to solve a societal problem, such as unemployment.

**Delivering what employers want**

Employers want colleges to understand and meet their needs at all times. It was not enough to provide courses, training or an apprentice because the solution had to be appropriate to address the problem, in the right way. It was also important that colleges delivered exactly what was agreed with the business. Employers who work with colleges invest significant resources into training, so they have high expectations of other service and outcomes:

‘They delivered what they said they would, when and where they said they would. It was very personalised. It was flexible and accessible. I couldn’t be happier’.

‘The college were flexible and that’s one of the benefits of working with this college. They tailor their processes to employers’ needs - a real key element.’

One employer said that the ‘training by the college was by far in excess of what they would normally provide for employees.’ This was in comparison to previous experience where the same employer had found it very hard to recruit Apprentices and ‘had given up because there were too many rules.’

**Business benefits**

Employers could see the benefits of working with a ‘good’ college. Overall, when employers found a ‘good’ college they wanted to keep working with the same college regardless of the training required. This further highlights the importance of good relationships and partnerships between employers and colleges. In such examples, colleges could be relied upon to provide high quality training; more confident and successful employees; and ultimately a better business. Some employers saw the ‘growth in employees’ confidence through the training.’ The training was beneficial for the business but also the employees. For one employer, the training provided by the college enabled new recruits to become effective employees and work at similar standards to current staff in a shorter time period.

Employers felt staff performance improved most amongst staff with no formal qualifications or limited reading and writing skills. Here the training supported
employees to develop functional skills, undertake basic skills courses or an ESOL course.

‘It was exciting and rewarding for many of my employees to achieve on a simple GCSE programme, many who left the local schools without any formal qualifications whatsoever. For them to work with a college of such status... a real sense of achievement which was absolutely palpable. Of course, for the non-English speakers it’s a great boost. So a fairly simple thing like that (training) makes a tremendous amount of difference.’

**Key Improvements**

Employers identified a number of key factors to improve employer engagement. These include:
- Listen to business.
- Focus on employer needs and skills. Keep up to date.
- Develop ongoing systematic formal engagement.
- More and better engagement with employer networks and sector bodies.
- Delivery must be modern, responsive and adaptable.
- Work as a sector together.
STAKEHOLDER EVIDENCE

Wider stakeholders in London provided views about FE colleges’ employer engagement. This included the CBI; the Federation of Small Business; London First; and the Association of Colleges (AoC). The key themes that emerge from the evidence focus on: experiences of working with FE colleges; barriers and challenges to successful employer engagement; and improving employer engagement.

The views of stakeholders are wide ranging. This reflects both their own, and where relevant, their members’ experiences. The stakeholders represent a large proportion of the business community in London. In the main, stakeholders feel that the good practice highlighted earlier in the report by specific colleges is not universal across London. Whilst, there are examples of excellent practice there are also examples where FE colleges are less well engaged with employers. Overall the evidence indicates differing views and a mixed picture of FE college employer engagement.

Experience of working with colleges

All of the stakeholders are involved with some FE colleges in a number of different ways. However, the nature, depth and level of this engagement varied significantly. For some stakeholders there was limited direct engagement with FE colleges through sector networks, meetings and through their members. For other stakeholders there is in-depth involvement with specific FE colleges in relation to programme delivery. For example, Jobcentre Plus staff worked directly with one college to deliver a training programme:

‘Several of our... London members are involved in the sector and many work with individual institutions to recruit apprentices and train staff.’

There is some concern from employer representative bodies that employers are relatively uninformed about FE colleges, their offer and activities. It is felt that employers rely on limited information, past experiences and word of mouth rather than direct contact with FE colleges:

‘Our members are often are uninformed about their local college’s offer, especially smaller businesses. They rely on past experiences which can be out of date.’

‘Too many smaller employers remain unaware of the services available and are concerned or daunted by the prospect of involving themselves.’

There is a disconnect and lack of communication between employers and colleges:

‘They find it difficult knowing how to approach the colleges, knowing where to go and where they are most needed.’
'My business members tell me they find it hard to distinguish one college from another in terms of specialisms. Do I need to go to college x instead of college y or can I go to any college to get the training that I need.'

Stakeholders also highlighted the increasing need to focus directly on employer skill requirements which creates a much more mutually dependant relationship. Colleges seem to need employer funding and engagement more. There is a shift away from putting on training and courses to understanding what employers want. Stakeholders feel that some colleges quickly responded to this challenge but that other colleges are still to fully appreciate the approach needed. Overall, stakeholders saw the focus on meeting local needs as beneficial for employers, colleges and the learners:

'Employers are now consumers of skills provision and services, but they are also critical in influencing vocational qualifications, offering work experience, and supporting interactive careers advice and opportunities.'

'We use colleges to deliver the training we can’t. One college we work with runs their employer engagement entirely separately from their ‘academic’ side. We see academic staff as having a different priority – managing teaching – rather than forging lasting relationships with employers.'

Membership bodies themselves work to foster links between the FE colleges and employers through joint events, and professional networks. It is a challenge to ensure the appropriate people attend and build direct links between individual employers and colleges:

'There are so many competing demands on time… it is difficult to be at every event and meeting.'

**Barriers and challenges to successful employer engagement**

Stakeholders saw the main barrier to colleges working successfully with employers as a lack of up to date knowledge about local employers, changing working practices and their skill needs. This is particularly the case for SMEs and micro-businesses. However, stakeholders feel this is essential and on the whole colleges need to be ‘more responsive to customers.’ Some stakeholders feel this lack of knowledge is reinforced by a lack of direct communication with local employers, especially micro businesses and sole traders:

'Smaller businesses don’t have the resources to invest too much time in skills and education. But they need to be engaged in different ways as they provide many jobs.'

'Colleges do not seem to join or do not often attend local Chamber of Commerce events or networking groups like FSB.'
A further challenge to building sustainable employer engagement is the changing skills policy environment. Whilst stakeholders did not feel employers understood the details, the ‘changing government policy, programmes, qualifications, eligibility and associated funding rules are confusing for employers.’

‘The constant changes are bewildering and even off putting for our members’.

Some stakeholders did not like the intermediaries that some of the colleges use to generate and build new business contacts:

‘The ‘middle folk’ (intermediaries) brokering new lines of business for colleges, hinder or prevent effective direct relationships with college staff.’

‘It prevents colleges from establishing a client base and can sap resources out of delivery.’

A significant challenge for colleges is that employers cannot always articulate their skill needs or align training needs to qualifications. Employers tend to know the type of ‘job’ but find it hard to specify the specific skills. ‘Members are often clearer about what they don’t want.’ Colleges that translate these requirements and work with employers rather than focusing on provision are seen as key.

The employer representative bodies felt that their members wanted to improve the skills of their workforce but ‘most businesses don’t have the time, particularly the smaller businesses, to really engage in their day-to-day activity but it’s a real long term priority.’

There remains some reluctance by some employers to pay for training that employers see might attract (or should attract) government funding. Coupled with tight resources in general, this is felt to have driven some colleges to ‘identify best wins sometimes big employers with larger numbers to secure provision.’

Employer bodies feel that some colleges ‘had grown to be trusted for some of their provision’ but this is built upon individual relationships rather than with the college as a whole. Any change in staffing, breaks the relationship and employers ‘had to start again’ with new college staff.

**Improving Employer Engagement**

Despite the evidence of good practice all the stakeholders could see potential for further improvements to employer engagement. It is felt that sharing good practice more widely across different networks (colleges and employers) will improve communication, understanding and embed good practice more widely across London.

In particular, employer representative bodies felt that encouraging local business people on to college boards of governors was an important step:
‘It helps give a better business perspective for the college but for the business it builds connections and can be useful for managers to develop board level skills.’

The following were suggested by stakeholders as ways to improve college employer engagement:

- All college staff must understand the importance and role of employers.
- Better communication with local employers, especially SMEs.
- Build relationships in a range of ways both direct and through networks.
- Co-ordinate engagement directly with employer bodies and networks.
- Cascade and share information/good practice between colleges.
- Flexible and responsive partnerships, services and provision.
- College staff to have secondments into industry and incorporate industry practitioners into colleges.
- Bring SMEs together to develop clusters.
CONCLUSIONS

Overall, college employer engagement is a mixed picture. Whilst it is clear that some specific FE colleges have very successful employer engagement practices, other colleges remain less engaged with local employers. More over challenges and barriers to successful employer engagement remain.

The FE colleges interviewed aim to be successful with a more employer driven skills approach. In these cases, FE colleges aim to use different opportunities for employer engagement and adopt a holistic approach across the college. The research does identify ‘untapped’ potential and further opportunities to build employer engagement. One example is through more effective use of college governors. Whilst some FE colleges fully involve governors in employer engagement, others do not. Employer college governors are a source of wider contacts and networks that will extend colleges reach.

Colleges have a unique role both within a local community and the skills system. However, it has been a challenge for colleges to adopt new ways of working and develop improved employer engagement. In many cases, colleges are learning as they go along but are developing a more sophisticated approach over time focusing more on whole college strategies. Engaging and working with SMEs remain a challenge due to the number and diversity of the many SMEs in a local area. These businesses are also less likely to adopt a strategic approach to skills development and colleges have found these relationships resource intensive to develop and maintain.

The colleges see further opportunities to strategically organise, collaborate and deliver based on a pan-sector approach. Such an approach would, in effect, achieve economies of scale and present opportunities for FE colleges to be seen as a coherent group of organisations. This cross sector approach could provide consistency of standards and approach.

The skills and abilities of college staff, leaders and governors remain central to delivering successful employer engagement. The research highlights that further investment in college staff and governors is necessary to maintain and build knowledge and skills.
RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to ensure that the good practice identified through the research is shared widely across the FE and skills sector to further improve employer engagement. The evidence from FE colleges, employers and wider stakeholders identifies a number of recommendations for the GLA and LEP to address some of the remaining challenges to effective employer engagement.

Strategic

- There is a continuing need and role for the GLA and LEP to focus on and address the nature of employer engagement on an ongoing basis. There is potential for this to be externally commissioned as part of a systematic Skills Strategy review process.
- There is a need for a joined-up, co-ordinated approach through a central body that is widely known, informed by an understanding of employer demand and economic trends shaped by the LEP.
- A system of peer support is required for colleges to help develop an employer engagement strategy or further improve an existing employer engagement strategy.

Co-operation

- Develop sector based ‘engagement’ clusters for SMEs to come together to build understanding and practice. Develop a facilitated pilot in a key growth sector or locality.
- Facilitate the sharing of good practice across the sector through case studies, events, ‘master classes’, visits to colleges and relevant promotional material.
- Facilitate employer representatives and sectors bodies working with colleges to challenge employers to consider future skills needs and stimulate demand.
- Engage and influence the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) to support college staff to build professional development on employer engagement.

Best Practice

- Build on and share the best practice of using employer skills training needs analysis to identify and build relationships with new employers.
- Focus on role of college Governors. Promote and encourage local business people on to the board of governors. There is the potential to use a similar model to school governors. Use the potential offered by Governors contacts and networks to maximize understanding of skills development.
APPENDIX 1 METHODOLOGY

This two-month study involves a mixed methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data. This includes an online survey of fifty FE colleges; consultation with wider stakeholders; and qualitative telephone interviews with ten colleges and associated employers. The timetable for the research is set out below.

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<tr>
<td>Submission of interim report</td>
<td>18 July 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Telephone interviews with colleges and employers</td>
<td>14 July - 12 August 2014</td>
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<td>Online survey closes</td>
<td>1 August 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consultation with wider stakeholders closes</td>
<td>1 August 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Submission of final report</td>
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Survey of FE colleges
Prior to the FE college survey invitation letters were sent to college Principals from NIACE’s Chief Executive to encourage responses. The online survey was then sent to both the college Principal and a named contact for employer engagement or business development. The survey was designed to capture a snapshot of FE colleges’ engagement with employers and their ability to respond to local skills needs. Questions focused on employer engagement activities; governance and strategy; success factors; key challenges and accessing support. Colleges were also invited to take part in the next phase of the study and to put forward examples of successful employer engagement. See Appendix 2 for a copy of the survey.

The survey was open for three weeks and a reminder was sent out one week prior to closure. Nine colleges responded by the deadline. The deadline was extended for one more week to encourage more returns and telephone calls were undertaken to all colleges that had not responded to promote the research and survey. The survey finally closed on 1 August 2014 with 15 responses.
Consultation with wider stakeholders

Wider stakeholders were also approached and invited to contribute to the study. This includes: Forum for Private Business; Federation for Small Business; Association of Colleges; London Chamber of Commerce; Ofsted; London Councils; Skills Funding Agency; Jobcentre Plus; National Apprenticeship Service and Prospects; and the National Careers Service a prime contractor in London. A named contact in each organisation was invited to complete a short online survey about FE Colleges and employer engagement in London. Specifically, they were asked for details of their work with colleges and their views on the success factors for effective working between colleges and employers. The survey was open for three weeks and a reminder was sent out one week prior to closure. Two responses were submitted by the deadline on 1 August 2014. In order to boost response rates, contact was made with a couple of employer body representatives and qualitative telephone interviews carried out.

Qualitative telephone interviews

From the online survey responses 10 FE colleges were invited to participate in qualitative telephone interviews. Two researchers reviewed the online survey evidence and identified the most appropriate colleges to participate. All the online survey respondents put forward examples of successful employer engagement and 14 consented to take part in the telephone interviews. As far as possible, the participating colleges included a mix in terms of: type of college, location, type of employer engagement activity, and size/type of employers involved. The colleges invited to take part in the telephone interviews highlighted different aspects and examples of good practice including: Apprenticeships; Traineeships; Employer Ownership Pilot; Pre-employment provision; Employer Champion scheme; career reviews and guidance; and governor involvement.

An invitation email to 10 FE colleges was followed-up with a telephone call to arrange a suitable interview appointment. A total of seven qualitative interviews with colleges were completed by 12 August 2014 and all the interviews took around 30 minutes. The telephone interviews followed up responses to the online survey and explored examples of successful employer engagement in detail. See Appendix 3 for a copy of the interview schedule for colleges. Some of the interviews included a number of different college staff to provide a fuller response and address different perspectives. The qualitative data from the telephone interviews was thematically analysed and is reported in the findings section. It is also used to develop detailed case studies of good practice and identify critical success factors for employer engagement.

The FE colleges provided the contact details for one or two employers they work with and who could input into the case studies of successful practice. See Appendix 4 for a copy of the interview schedule for employers. A thematic analysis of the data
from the three employer interviews is presented in the findings section. Qualitative information from the employers is incorporated in the individual case studies.
FE Colleges’ Employer Engagement in London

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) has been commissioned by the Greater London Authority on behalf of London Enterprise Panel’s Skills and Employment Working Group (SEWG) to research FE colleges’ employer engagement in London.

Through this survey we would like to capture a snapshot of FE colleges’ engagement with employers and their ability to respond to local skills needs. We are also seeking to identify examples of successful employer engagement practices.

If you have any questions or would like more information please e-mail nigel.maddern@niace.org.uk, call 0116 204 4254, or call/text 07825 571 709.

If you would like a PDF/Word version of this survey to complete before submitting an online response, please contact Nigel on the above. We will only be accepting responses through this online survey.

Please read the following before you begin:

- This survey has been designed to be user-friendly and should take approximately 30 minutes to complete
- The survey needs to completed in one sitting
- Questions marked with * are critical to us and will need to be completed in order to progress through the survey
- In order to move through the survey, please use the ‘Next’ and ‘Previous’ buttons at the bottom of the screen. Please do not use ‘Back’ and ‘Forward’ buttons on your internet browser window
- This survey will close 12 pm Monday 7 July 2014

All responses will be reported anonymously; this means that it will not be possible to identify you in our analysis. You can read NIACE’s Privacy Policy at: www.niace.org/privacy-policy

Personal information will be treated as confidential and not used for any other purpose or related beyond the scope of this project. All personal data collected will be treated in strictest confidence and adhere to the Data Protection Act and NIACE’s policy on data protection.
**About Your College**

Please complete the following information about your college.

**1. Name of college** *(This will only be used to identify duplicate responses to the survey) *(Required)*

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**2. Type of college** *(Required)*

Select one.

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**3. Area of London** *(Required)*

Select one.

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**4. How many learners have enrolled on a course at your college this academic year?** (*Required)

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**5. How many governors does your college have?** (*Required)

*Enter a number.*

**6. How many employer representatives are on your college board of governors?** (*Required)

*Enter a number.*

**Your college’s employer engagement activities**

**7. Does your college consult employers about their local skills needs?** (*Required)

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**7.1 How does your college consult with employers about their local skills needs?**

*Enter details.*
8. Does your college work with any of the following local employer networks to meet local employer needs? (*Required)

Select all that apply.

- [ ] Local Authority
- [ ] Jobs and Skills Group
- [ ] Federation of Small Businesses
- [ ] Local Enterprise Panel
- [ ] Chamber of Commerce
- [ ] Other, please specify: [ ]
- [ ] None

9. Does your college work with any of the following local employment brokering services to meet local employer needs? (*Required)

Select all that apply.

- [ ] Jobcentre Plus
- [ ] Work Programme providers
- [ ] Employment agencies
- [ ] Other, please specify: [ ]
- [ ] None

10. In total, approximately how many employers does your college work with? (*Required)

Enter a number.
11. What are the Sector Subject Areas of the employers your college works with? Please select all that apply. (*Required)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Select all that apply.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Science and Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Construction, Planning and the Built Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Information and Communication Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Retail and Commercial Enterprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Leisure, Travel and Tourism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Arts, Media and Publishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ History, Philosophy and Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Social Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Languages, Literature and Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Preparation for Life and Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Business, Administration and Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Not sure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
*12. What size of employers do you most frequently work with? (Please select all that apply)(*Required)

**Select all that apply.**

- [ ] 0 to 9 employees (micro business)
- [ ] 10 to 49 employees (small business)
- [ ] 50 to 249 employees (medium business)
- [ ] 250 to 999 employees (large/medium business)
- [ ] 1,000 + employees (large business)

*13. What are the main reasons your college works with these types of employers?(*Required)

**Select all that apply.**

- [ ] Apprenticeships
- [ ] Other work-based learning
- [ ] Pre-employment skills provision
- [ ] Traineeships
- [ ] Work Experience opportunities
- [ ] Other, please specify:
  
  
  
  


# College Governance and Employer Engagement Activities

We would like to know about your college governors' involvement in and approach to employer engagement.

*14. How active are your college's governors in facilitating employer engagement activity? (*Required)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Select one.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>○ Very active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Quite active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Not very active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Not at all active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Don't know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14.1 Please briefly describe the activities your college's governors take in support of Employer Engagement.

[Blank space for description]

*14.2 What level of impact does having college governor representation make to the success of your college's employer engagement activities? (*Required)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Select one.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>○ High impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Moderate impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Low impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ No impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Don't know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


15. Does your college have a formal strategy for employer engagement? (*Required)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Select one.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Go to question number 19.)

16. Who is responsible for your college's employer engagement strategy?

17. What are the key aims of your college's employer engagement strategy?

18. Does your college use local labour market information to inform its strategy? (*Required)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Select one.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Successful employer engagement

19. Overall, how successful do you feel your college is in engaging employers? (*Required)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Select one.</th>
<th>Answer question number 19.1, 19.2.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very successful</td>
<td>(Answer question number 19.1, 19.2.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite successful</td>
<td>(Answer question number 19.1, 19.2.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very successful</td>
<td>(Answer question number 19.1.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all successful</td>
<td>(Answer question number 19.1.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

19.1 How does your college monitor and/or evaluate the success of its employer engagement activities?

19.2 Please describe what it is that makes your college's employer engagement successful.
20. Are good employer engagement practices shared across your college? (*Required)

Select one.

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

21. Does your college, or any of its departments, share good employment engagement practice with other colleges? (*Required)

Select one.

- Yes
- No

22. What key challenges has your college encountered when working with employers?

23. How is your college addressing these challenges?
24. Has your college accessed support to develop delivery of its employer engagement activities? (*Required)

Select one.

- Yes (Answer question number 24.1, 24.2.)
- No (Answer question number 24.3.)
- Don’t know (Answer question number 24.3.)

24.1 What kind of support has your college accessed to develop the delivery of its employer engagement activities?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

24.2 What further support would your college need and from where/whom to develop its employer engagement activities?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

24.3 What further support, if any, would your college need and from where/whom to develop its employer engagement activities?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
25. We are seeking examples of successful employer engagement. Please provide brief details of any examples you would like to highlight.

| Example 1 |
| Example 2 |
| Example 3 |

**Further involvement in our research**

*26. NIACE is looking to conduct follow-up telephone interviews with a sample of respondents to this survey, in order to learn more about employer engagement activities in London FE colleges. Would you be happy to take part in a follow-up telephone interview? (*Required)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Select one.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐ Yes (Answer question number 26.1.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*26.1 Please provide the details below. (*Required)*

| *Name: |
| *Job title: |
| *Email: |
| *Telephone: |
APPENDIX 3 INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR FE COLLEGES

Based on individual responses to the survey, questions will be tailored and prompts added as appropriate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Please can you briefly describe your role at the college?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Can I start by asking you to provide further detail/ clarification on some points you raised in the survey...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>In the survey, you put forward your work with/on X as an example of good practice. Please could you tell me more about this work. When, how and why was it developed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Why did you highlight it as an example of good practice? What is good about it? What works well, and why? What are the critical success factors?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>How has/does this employer engagement practice benefit the college? Prompt for what data they collect on impact/ outcomes, impact on curriculum design etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>What, if any, other outcomes result from this work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>In your experience, what facilitates successful college-employer engagement? What makes working with FE Colleges attractive to employers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>What would be your key messages to other FE colleges looking to develop their employer engagement work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>What are your key messages for other key stakeholders re college-employer engagement? e.g. Government, LEP, AoC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Do you have any additional comments?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX 4 INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR EMPLOYERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1 | Please can you provide brief details about your company?  
    | *Type of company, what they do, size etc*                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 2 | What is your role within the company?                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 3 | I’d now like to ask you some questions about your work with X college                                                                                                                                        |
| 4 | When did you start working with the college?                                                                                                                                                               |
| 5 | How did the partnership get started?                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 6 | What are your main reasons for working with the college?  
    | *e.g. apprenticeships, traineeships*                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 7 | What works well, and why?  
    | *Prompt for the critical success factors*                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 8 | What works less well?  
    | *Prompt for what would help improve things*                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 9 | What have been the key benefits of working with X college for your company?  
    | *Prompt for how they capture impact, any unexpected outcomes/spin offs*                                                                                                                                     |
| 10| Who else benefits from the partnership, and in what ways?  
    | *e.g. employees, clients, suppliers*                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 11| In your experience, what helps successful college-employer engagement?                                                                                                                                      |
| 12| What would be your key message to FE colleges looking to develop their employer engagement work?                                                                                                            |
| 13| Do you have any additional comments?                                                                                                                                                                       |