

# Influence through Collaboration:

Employer Demand for Higher Learning and Engagement with  
Higher Education

## Summary Report

Helen Connor and Wendy Hirsh



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## **The Research Study**

The research sought to explore employer demands for higher learning and skills, how these are articulated to higher education (HE) providers and have influence on the HE curriculum and development of new HE provision. It was undertaken in the context of the Leitch report's recommendations for the UK to achieve world-class skills through the development of a more employer-led focus in the skills system. Through a number of case studies of employer-HE engagement, 30 in all, the research sought the views and experiences of the parties involved in developing the business-HE relationship. It captured employer engagement with HE for the purposes of influencing the supply of new graduate recruits as well as for meeting employee development needs, at undergraduate or postgraduate/post-experience levels.

The interviews focused on five contrasting business sectors: construction, engineering, financial and business services, IT and creative industries/media. They covered a range of businesses of varying sizes and structures, as well as universities and colleges in England and Wales. Although the case studies represent a sample of the interactions between business and HE that take place, the evidence gathered helped to identify some broad conclusions and illustrates a number of more generalised themes.

This study, which built on previous research at CIHE and elsewhere, sought to inform and guide policy on higher level skills and HE's role in workforce development<sup>1</sup>.

## **Sponsoring Organisations**

The research was undertaken between September 2007 and April 2008 by the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) with support from a consortium of funders: the then Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA), the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), Universities UK (UUK), Edge and London South Bank University. We are most grateful to them all.

We held a seminar, hosted at DIUS in May 2008, with support from John Lewis Plc, at which a draft of this report was considered. A wide range of academic, business and policy people, including research participants, joined this discussion and again we are most grateful for their insights and involvement. A list of organisations which participated in the research is shown on page 14.

## **CIHE Project Team**

Helen Connor (Director and co-author), Wendy Hirsh (co-author), Hugh Smith, Peter Forbes, Madeleine King and Peter Ashworth. Project administrator and publication design by Stephanie Scott-Davies.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the latest in a series of CIHE reports on workforce development and HE; previous CIHE reports are available at [www.cihe-uk.com/publications.php](http://www.cihe-uk.com/publications.php)

# Foreword

The future of the UK rests on innovation, enterprise and high value adding products, services and management. Higher education makes a major contribution to this agenda through the creation, dissemination and application of knowledge. This includes the development of the graduates, post-graduates, existing staff and management teams who power successful organisations wherever they may be.

This report focuses on employer demands for higher learning and how these get articulated and then met through effective employer engagement with universities and colleges. Through a range of practical examples covering different business sectors, universities and colleges the research explored how employers can work with those in higher education (HE) to develop the curriculum and new learning provision. It identifies success stories and where there are problems and concerns. Its scope covers employers' needs for graduates, postgraduates and the development of existing staff and management teams.

Businesses have diverse and multiple needs for higher learning. Universities are one of the players in a system embracing universities, colleges, private training providers, in-house training and professional bodies. It must be an aim of policy to join these often fragmented elements into a more coherent whole including via comprehensive qualification and credit frameworks and funding – especially in England. Universities have diverse offerings and strengths.

Many employers want to develop their management and leadership; most want to acquire graduates who have good analytical and general employability skills; some may also require specific technical skills and leading edge knowledge. Universities are valued by employers because they help develop through long courses the analytical reflective practitioners who can transform organisations; they offer intellectual 'stretch'; support innovation and creativity; and provide access to in-depth expertise in a particular field. These are generally different from what external or internal private training providers offer.

One of the clear messages from the research is that employer demand for higher learning is more likely to get converted successfully into HE supply if there is genuine collaboration and mutual benefit. We question the validity of a supplier-customer type of contractual model of employer-HE engagement. Employers and HE providers need to develop the trust and understanding that comes from building relationships.

Another clear message is that higher education will benefit most from focusing on what it is good at; this is what employers' value most. Businesses consider that the UK develops some of the best graduates and post-graduates in the world. Our strength lies in our approach to learning; that has problem solving at its core; in our multicultural society and campuses, which is reinforced by international students; in our creativity and multidisciplinary approaches to issues. In an increasingly globally competitive age, businesses and universities have never needed each other more. I hope this report and the underpinning research shows how they can better co-operate for their own benefit and that of lifelong learners across the UK.

I am most grateful to Helen Connor and her team for their fine work.



Richard A Brown  
Chief Executive



# Introduction

Higher education can make a major contribution to meeting the UK's skills and productivity needs in addressing the global challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as set out by Leitch in his report on skills and in other recent policy papers<sup>2</sup>. This requires closer working with businesses to help ensure high quality graduates have work-relevant skills and more adults in the workplace can advance their learning and development. This research study sought to get a better understanding of this: how employer demand for higher learning and skills gets articulated to higher education (HE)<sup>3</sup> and influences provision and graduate supply through employer engagement with universities and colleges. It focused on a range of practical examples of how employer needs can be met through working with HE and also their use of private training providers. It identified success stories in engaging with HE and also where there are problems and concerns.

This summary report contains the key findings of the research study. The full findings are presented in a report accessible from the CIHE website ([www.cihe-uk.com](http://www.cihe-uk.com)) where further details can also be found on the case studies which formed the basis of the research evidence and analysis.

## The market for higher learning

Businesses have diverse and multiple needs for higher skills and learning, only some of which are currently sought from the HE sector. Universities are one set of players in a broad and fragmented marketplace for higher learning and skills, which can be supplied from various sources – universities, further education colleges, private training providers, in-house and professional bodies. Equally, universities have diverse offerings to employers and employees and different perceived strengths.

Employers generally engage with HE to meet specific needs – at sector, company or business unit level, or in particular disciplines and at different levels. This means that the focus of employer influence tends

to be on specific learning programmes or activities rather than on the HE curriculum in general. This was illustrated in most, though not all, of our cases studies (see examples shown over page).

The case studies showed that engagement and influence can take many forms and involve a range of types of universities and colleges, to meet needs at different levels (from pre-HE

to PhDs) and for different purposes. This included employers' needs for good quality graduates (e.g. Foundation degree, HND, BA /BSc, MA / MSc) as well as for workforce development which was often not accredited. In addition to the HE engagement activity featured in the case studies, most businesses use in-house resources and private training providers, and these tend to be the dominant supplier of the workforce development needs of most. The strengths of universities are generally seen as different from what private training providers offer, many of whom have greater strengths in providing specific training solutions often on fairly short timescales. Universities also have other priorities than responding to employers, and constraints to work within, which can affect their ability to respond to employer demands.

*“The strengths of universities are generally seen as different from what private training providers offer...”*

<sup>2</sup> HM Treasury, (2006) Leitch Report on Skills to 2020 and more recently; DIUS consultation paper *Higher Education at Work: high skills, high value* (April 2008) and Welsh Assembly Government consultation *Skills that work for Wales* (January 2008) *Skills for Scotland*, The Scottish Government, 2007

<sup>3</sup> The research covered all HE providers - universities and colleges of higher and/or further education which provide high level programmes of study (at National Qualifications Framework (NQF) levels 4 - 8)

**A few examples of case studies in the research, which illustrate the diversity of employer engagement<sup>4</sup>**

A suite of programmes was developed for a major engineering company by a pre-92 university to fill a gap in systems engineering, identified by the company. Initially, the partnership focused on an undergraduate programme and then led to a range of other short courses and awards being developed, at postgraduate and post-experience levels, to meet the company's other workforce development needs.

A large business services firm wanted an enhanced pool of graduate talent who could make faster career progress. It chose a pre-92 university to work with to develop a company-tailored accountancy and finance degree, which also incorporates accreditation towards professional qualifications.

A major IT company is piloting a new foundation degree at a post-92 university, local to one of its businesses, which employees take part-time over 2 years. They are recruited as 18 year old A level holders into real jobs. The company wants to build more responsiveness and flexibility into its graduate resourcing and improve the supply of graduates with a mix of business and IT skills.

A small firm in the creative sector with an evolving relationship with a nearby college. This began when the firm's director took part in a validation board; it led on to the firm giving work placements to students. In turn the firm's staff have provided input into new foundation degrees and other course developments, and also given advice to the college on business matters.

A large IT company demonstrates a more developed, integrated strategic approach to HE engagement by: its involvement at sectoral level with their Sector Skills Council; working with a number of universities on foundation degrees, teaching materials, vendor qualifications and aspects of the technical curricula; providing a number of PhD internships; and keeping close contact with academics at leading research departments in computer science.

On a civil engineering degree, the skills element which gives students hands-on experience of building projects, was designed by a 3-way partnership between a pre-92 university, a building contractor and a design consultancy, with support from the construction SSC. It has proved so popular it now has involvement from other companies, which give direct financial and other support, to its delivery, and the idea has spread to other universities.

An apprenticeship programme has been developed in partnership with an engineering company, a local post-92 university and a local college, with support from its SSC. Employees study part-time for a foundation degree, at the same time gaining relevant work experience and skills (including NVQs). On completion, they can register as Incorporated Engineers.

A set of accredited modules has been developed to meet the needs of a particular professional group in a partnership between a financial services company and a pre-92 university. They are taken over a number of days at the university, and delivered by academic experts from a number of faculties.

<sup>4</sup> Details of these and other case studies can be accessed at [www.cihe-uk.com](http://www.cihe-uk.com)



# Employer engagement and influence

From these general observations, the research provides three clear overarching messages:

- The main one is that employer influence on HE does not come through a simple customer-supplier model but through active collaboration where issues of 'fit' need to be considered to make the engagement work effectively.
- A second is that HE is seen by employers as being good at certain things and not others, and so should play to its strengths and focus on what employers value most.
- And a third is that employers can have little real influence on HE supply without both parties being reasonably engaged and committed – being in it *'for the long haul'*. This requires resources from both sides being expended on making the partnership work.

education for the sector to be able to respond and so grow its share of the employer learning market

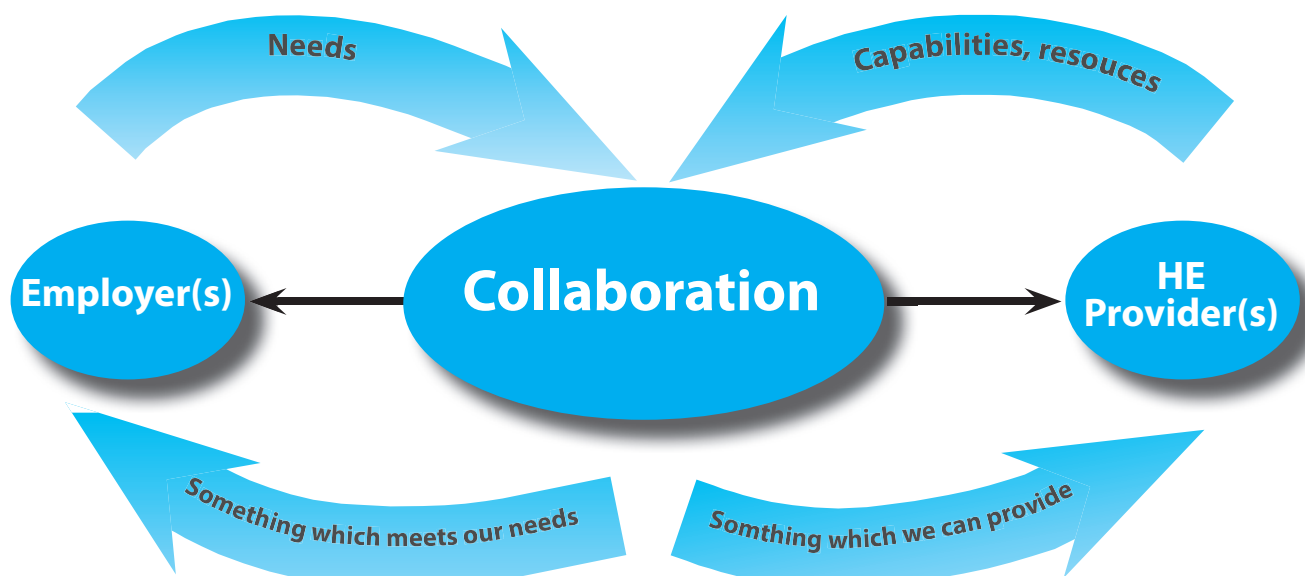
The research showed that employers behave distinctively and often individually in the way they respond to their actual circumstances concerning skills and resources. They have different motivations for coming to the HE sector to have these needs met and want different things in terms of outcomes, delivery, assessment methods, qualifications and so on. Few HE providers can seriously offer a lot of very bespoke workforce development products, even the most business focused ones or those at the high value end of the market for leadership and development, and rarely on short timescales. Furthermore, few university staff are familiar with the more informal learning in the workplace and the more experiential and facilitative style of company learning that employers increasingly prefer for their staff.

## Collaboration

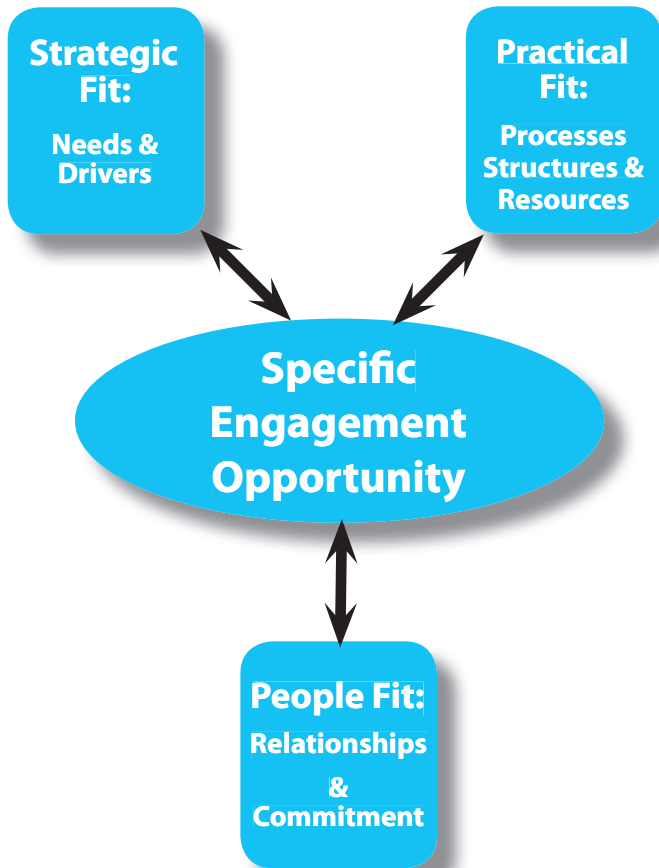
Employer demand for higher learning is more likely to get converted successfully into HE supply if there is genuine collaboration and mutual benefit in the partnership. We question the validity of a supplier-customer type of contractual model of employer-HE engagement. It is not that employers need only to articulate better what they want from higher

We found that a model of active collaboration where employers and HE providers enter into a dialogue to understand each other's needs (drivers), capabilities and constraints, and then see how they can together make a partnership work, reflected better the experiences of our case study participants.

### The active collaboration model of employer engagement with HE



### Engagement opportunities and dimensions of fit



### Getting the right 'fit'

Employers and HE providers need to consider a number of questions of strategic and practical 'fit' to make the engagement work successfully. Right from the start, questions of strategic fit are likely to be important: is this the type of opportunity our organisation is interested in? Does it align with the kind of business strategy we are pursuing? Equally important are questions of practical fit, such as: how might we bring it into being? As an employer: what do we need to do, and do we have the capability and resources to do it? As an HE provider: do we have the capacity, capabilities and structures to deliver what employers or work-based learners are seeking? Can we fund its development and sustainability?

Relationship and commitment questions of 'fit' are important too. Both employers and HE providers need to have the right kinds of personal relationships in place. This might be: do we have someone interested in pursuing this opportunity and making it happen? Does our culture look kindly on or react well to this kind of thing? Does the other party have people that we can work with?

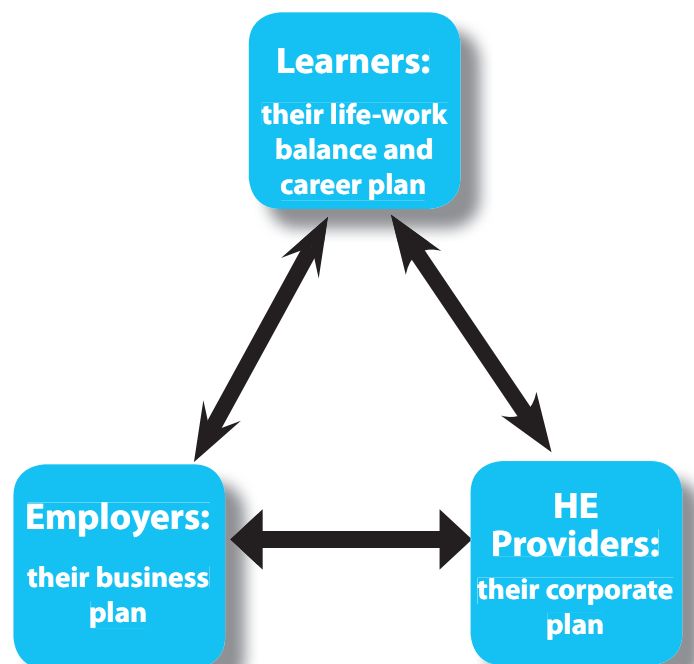
### Learners are important stakeholders too

The specific needs of the third member of the relationship, the learners (who may be employees) need to be considered also. They are part of a triangular relationship in the engagement process. This was evident in many of the case studies where the process of engagement worked in different ways for the benefits of each stakeholder, and also the nature of the interaction varied depending on the relative dominance of each stakeholder. This contrasts with much of traditional HE where the provider has a limited ability to make a bespoke response and hence often dictates what is provided.

### Strategic drivers

A priority for many employers is improving the management and leadership skills at professional and higher levels. They also seek good employability skills in graduate recruits (communication skills in particular) and for many also specific technical skills and leading edge knowledge depending on sector and business. Universities are valued by employers for particular strengths. The strategic reasons for engaging with HE include:

### The key stakeholders in HE-employer engagement



- providing the future pipeline of ‘talent’ for their business, and sometimes their sector also; this is often seen as the priority reason;
- giving employees intellectual ‘stretch’ (in analytical thinking, or challenging them as part of personal development);
- supporting innovation and creativity;
- providing access to in-depth expertise in a particular field or leading edge knowledge;
- for accreditation purposes (but only for some sectors) generally it is employees who value this more.

Differences were evident in the strategic perspectives of employers, even within the same sector, so the significance of these ‘drivers’ varies from employer to employer, and between business divisions or functions within the same firm.

For HE providers, the main driver of demand is student not employer demand and so their strategic reasons for engaging with employers tend to link with the impact on student intake and their perceived quality and reputation in the student market; this is often associated with improving graduate employability. In some areas, academics who wish to stay at the leading edge of their field need to stay in touch with leading edge applications and knowledge in business, which in turn is fed into research and teaching. But universities are very diverse in their institutional strategies and the way they wish to build their brand, so here too we see significant differences in the relative importance of the engagement drivers.

For the learners, employer engagement will only work well if the outcomes satisfy their strategic drivers also. The attraction for students is being able to see good prospects for future employment, and for employees improved chance of promotion, better pay or access to more interesting work. Part-time students need offerings that fit with the demands of their working and home lives.

## Playing to HE strengths

Higher education will benefit most from focusing on what it is good at and what employers value most. We found that employers have more interest currently in engaging with HE providers to ensure the supply of good graduate recruits who have technical and generic skills and relevant work experience. Where we found examples of HE meeting the development

needs of employees, it was in specific and niche areas. This was more likely to be at NQF<sup>5</sup> Level 7 and above (i.e. postgraduate) in specific technical or business areas, or at Levels 5 or 6 to broaden the skills base of graduate employees, rather than in ‘upskilling’ to Level 4. For universities to grow the workforce development market requires them to have better links with a wider range of businesses through their marketing and other activities, and better support frameworks in funding, quality and (in England) accreditation; for business to better appreciate how universities can benefit them and for them to use universities enough to make the provision economic to develop and deliver. The third stakeholder, employees, have needs to be considered too: they need to be able to access good quality information and guidance to help them to see suitable opportunities and to make choices about taking higher learning or gaining qualifications, and be given appropriate support to follow them through.

**“...real  
commitment  
requires  
expenditure  
& input from  
both sides”**

## Influence means real engagement

Employer influence on HE comes from substantial and strategic commitment by both sides of the partnership, often built up over time. Real commitment requires expenditure and input of resources from both sides. Stable relationships are needed from which further activities can be developed together. Many of our case study examples were evolving relationships where individuals entered into a partnership with fairly open minds and made adjustments to meet changing circumstances. Intermediary bodies (such as Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs), Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), employer associations, local development agencies and Business Links) can help to broker contacts and support the development of engagement and influence in a sustainable way, but only if given funding to do it and if they have credibility in the HE and business sectors.

5 National Qualification Framework

## Getting to a win-win-win

A number of key factors seen in our more successful case study examples help to make engagement work effectively. They include:

- Business identifying clearly that the need exists – what kind of learning, what kind of work, and for what kind of people?
- Choosing the right partners to work with. This can relate to ‘branding’ (both HE providers and employers) as well as specific requirements of each party.
- Having clear points of contact within universities and colleges (and also within businesses); having these at the centre and at department/faculty level seemed to work best.
- Taking account of learner needs as they are the main customers after all.
- Providers having the capacity and capability to deliver what employers (and employees) require. It can mean providers bringing in external staff or using off-campus resources.
- People involved being able to make and sustain relationships and being committed (also commitment from the top of organisations). Mutual respect, trust and personal relationships are seen as key.
- Recognising that employers can bring something complimentary (for example: leading edge knowledge and applications, physical resources, ideas) and not just additional funding.
- Building in review and adjustments to accommodate changes, including learner feedback; also effective governance arrangements for partnership working. Both of these need to align with business and academic structures.
- And having the ‘glue’ that makes it all work. This comes easiest from businesses keeping a continuing relationship with the HE sector, through their graduate recruitment activities or if not a regular graduate recruiter, through informal contact with university or college staff or via local learning or sector networks.

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## Implications

The report’s evidence identifies several challenges and opportunities for the different stakeholder groups. It implies that:

### Employers should:

- Be clear about what they want from HE with practical suggestions based on analysis of work roles, skill needs and how they are changing, rather than general statements about what is lacking in HE or in graduates.
- Choose academic partners carefully, ones they can work with and meet their objectives, and be more aware of the full range of what HE can potentially provide.
- Appreciate and use universities for their strengths. Some colleges and private training providers may be better placed to meet some needs, such as very tailored learning solutions over short timescales.
- Consider using a range of possible links -

informal contacts, local networks, internships, knowledge exchanges and other mechanisms - to see what HE can offer and where graduate recruits or ‘upskilling’ employees can bring added value to the business, and then being able to sustain those HE contacts (this is especially relevant for SMEs).

### HE providers should:

- Make it easier for employers and employees to find out what HE can offer through for example: improved marketing, having points of contact that employers can easily find, both centrally and at subject levels within institutions, and encouraging informal employer contact with HE staff through opportunities for employers with shared interests to meet up at universities.
- Improve internal communications to better join up the external opportunities and internal possible responses.

- Be business-like in dealings with employers, interested and responsive but also firm and realistic in negotiations about cost and sustainability.
  - Take a more strategic approach to employer engagement: build on good employer relationships in one area, like recruitment or research, to develop others, like student work experience and workforce development; use knowledge exchange links to improve the capabilities in the organisations involved.
  - Encourage academics to remain (or become more) 'industry active' and make industry more aware of their applied research.
  - Develop educational partnerships with other providers where each plays to its own strengths, and so derive mutual benefits of working together and share financial risks going into new areas.
- RDA, LLNs can have an important brokerage or facilitating role; but they need to have good standing, be credible and funded accordingly.
- SSCs in particular have two key roles: articulating broad sector needs to HE and the different needs which might exist within their sectors, and helping to facilitate engagement with HE. They need to offer practical support and funding, not just exhortation. If developing new HE sector provision, then HE providers need to be involved in discussions with them and employers at an early stage. SSCs have important roles within regions as well as nationally and these need to be developed and resourced.
  - Reduce the number of intermediary organisations in the market especially at the regional and local level so that it seems less complex to businesses. We look to the new Commission for Employment and Skills to take positive steps here.
  - Recognise that the innovation and enterprise that underpins our future competitiveness requires businesses to reposition themselves and that it is this repositioning that will drive up their demand for higher skills. Equally, that repositioning needs a skilled workforce if it is to be implemented. Thus there needs to be a stronger link between the skills and innovation policy agendas. This should also encourage more radical thinking on how HE can engage with and deliver both innovation and learning to smaller enterprises in particular.

## **Learners should:**

- Be able to access good quality information, advice and guidance (IAG). This includes improving the confidence of adults who have not experienced HE, helping them to look beyond traditional HE courses and learning environments and helping them to make good choices which can meet both career aspirations and fit best with their work/family/home life balance.

## **Policy-makers and Intermediary bodies should:**

- Support the development of real collaboration and partnership working between HE and employers rather than giving emphasis as currently to new 'employer-led' HE provision and customer-supplier models.
- Acknowledge higher level learning as a system with a range of players and so encourage wider partnerships between HE and other providers (colleges, private providers, in-house and professional bodies). This will need to be supported by a more coherent qualifications and credit framework in England.
- Look at HE engagement in a more holistic way, as part of a whole business model which may involve knowledge exchange and other benefits additional to learning outcomes (especially relevant to SMEs).
- Help employers and HE providers to find good partners and sustain relationships over time. This is where intermediary bodies like SSCs,



# List of participants

We are grateful for the assistance provided by staff in the following organisations which participated in the research for this project:

ACBEE	Accenture
Airbus	American Express
Atkins Global	Augusta Westland
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Black and Decker	BT plc
Central Salford Urban Regeneration Company	Cardiff University
Churchill Insurance	Chartered Institute of Bankers in Scotland
City and Guilds	CITB - Construction Skills
Corus Group	City College, Manchester
Dawnus	Cranfield School of Management
Easyjet	New Durham College
FDMX	E-skills
Foundation Degree Forward	First 11 Ltd
Futureworks	Financial Services SSC
Higher Education Academy	GMSA
HSBC Bank plc	Imperial College, University of London
John Doyle Construction Ltd	Kaplan International Ltd
Lancaster University Management School	Legal and General Group plc
Linking London LLN	Lloyds TSB Insurance
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Northampton University	Obsidian Research
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SFW Ltd	Sigmer Technologies
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*Madeleine King, John Widdowson and Richard Brown (£6) June 2008 ISBN 1 874223 70 X*

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*Keith Herrmann (£6) May 2008 ISBN 1 874223 69 6*

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