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Executive summary

This report is the employer engagement strand of the HEA flexible pedagogies project. It asks why and to what extent might flexible pedagogies be promoted and in what ways.

Employer engagement is defined as a range of activities, initiatives and approaches which are best conceptualised as a continuum. It includes responsive teaching and learning developments for upskilling and developing people already in work as well as fostering capability and attributes to enhance the employability of students in higher education (HE).

A deliberately fluid interpretation of pedagogy has been adopted in this report. This is to take into account the complex environment in which the learning takes place and how the employer perspective may shape, enable or constrain a flexible approach. For this reason the report - as does the wider project - frequently uses the plural ‘pedagogies’ rather than the singular ‘pedagogy’.

The complex nature of employer engagement with higher education has led to the construction of a typology of learners. This has been done to create a mechanism through which to examine how flexible pedagogies in the delivery of learning might be promoted.

The first type is learners already at work, they are employees and therefore have a dual identity. The second model relates to learners who are using a work-related learning activity to develop their knowledge, skills and understanding. They may be students first and foremost. What is distinctive in both contexts is that there is a three-way relationship between higher education provider, learner and employer. The need to engage with the interests and learning needs of both learner and employer is a central feature of the employer engagement agenda.

Flexible pedagogies for employer engagement are explored by considering whether the primary driver is facilitating flexible access to lifelong learning, or if it is the development of a flexible customised system that addresses lifelong learning and the skills training needs of potential and existing workers.

The report explores the relevant literature associated with flexible pedagogies and draws on examples of practice. This is arranged under the broad headings of flexible learning, work-based learning, and work-related learning.

The paper asserts that the pedagogies associated with employer engagement are determined by how the broader learning culture is framed. In this case it is the workplace. It recognises tensions inherent between enhancing the learner experience and responding to employer demands. It argues that flexible pedagogies for employer engagement can only happen when policies, business models and procedures allow for them. It also asserts that a successful endeavour is dependent on having staff with the contextual knowledge and understanding to select appropriate tools and approaches.

The report notes that flexible pedagogic offers for employer engagement encompass a range of tools and techniques. If they are selected appropriately they can be used to flex and enhance learning opportunities in this context. It concludes by offering a model with which to explore the extent of flexibility in the pedagogical offer when considering new developments that involve employer engagement.
Introduction

This strand of the flexible pedagogies project addresses the learning activities associated with the processes of employer engagement. Its focus is how pedagogical approaches might be developed or flexed to address working with employers, and how engaging with employer organisations informs and directs those pedagogical approaches. Major policy and educational contexts inform the matter of flexibility, the complexities of which are particularly evident in the multi-stakeholder forum that accommodates employer engagement. Stakeholders include teaching and learning providers (universities, colleges, professional bodies, and private organisations), employers and learners themselves. It is acknowledged that the majority of engagements examined in this report involve higher education institutions. However it is also noted that other agencies (professional bodies, private institutions and further education colleges) are also active and so the term provider is used throughout the report.

Employers can range from multi-national corporations through to regional and local organisations both public and private sector and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Learners associated with this strand come from a wide range of backgrounds and profiles.

Setting a context for employer engagement

It is important to locate higher education’s engagement with employers in a broad context. The term employer engagement has been described as ‘the process through which employers directly participate in activity facilitated by an external organisation in pursuit of shared objectives’ (Sector Skills Development Agency 2007, p.3). In the higher education (HE) landscape this is usually done by providing opportunities for those already in the workforce to enhance knowledge and understanding. This paper recognises that the remit is more extensive. Learners certainly can be primarily in the workplace and can range from experienced professionals needing higher level developments through to employees whose upskilling needs may be generic or transitioning through the threshold of higher level study. Learners, however, may also be primarily associated with a higher education context in a more traditional pattern of study and undertaking learning in a workplace either as part of or while aligned to a programme. Managing this type of activity also requires engagement with employers.

So here employer engagement is defined as responsive development for employee upskilling or on developing dispositions and attributes to enhance employability. This is an inter-connected and closely woven set of activities which is complex and multi-faceted. For example, the contemporary employability development agenda is predicated on a perceived understanding of which graduate skills, attributes and capabilities are valued. This can only be determined through engaging with business, professions and employers. Such a dialogue informs higher education firstly about how it can prepare graduates for working life and secondly about how working life might be enhanced through learning provision.

There is no single, succinct definition of what is meant by pedagogy in the context of employer engagement. This strand was informed initially by this Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) explanation which asserts that: “Effective pedagogy promotes the active engagement of the student as learner. The main aim of higher learning should be learners’ independence and autonomy. This involves engaging students actively in their own learning, and ensuring that they acquire a repertoire of learning strategies and practices, develop positive learning dispositions, and build the confidence to become agents in their own learning.” (TLRP 2010, p.16.) However a more fluid interpretation is proposed here, taking into account the breadth of the environment in which the learning takes place and how the employer perspective shapes, enables or constrains a flexible pedagogic approach.
Exploring flexibility

Asking why, to what extent and in what ways flexible pedagogies might be promoted in employer engagement, this report explores flexibility at three levels:

- the first of these is flexibility for whom, and at what level. Flexibility of choice for learners may differ from that of employers. Flexibility for academic staff may conflict with that for learner and employer. So to what extent are stakeholders flexible and to what extent can such flexibility be fostered and enhanced?
- the second level is the environmental circumstances. What kinds of flexibility in teaching and learning are most appropriate to the context?
- the third level relates to structures. It is important to explore to what extent an institution’s policies, systems and business models facilitate or hamper a flexible pedagogic offer.

The report is informed by relevant literature and selected examples to address the theory and practice underpinning employer engagement with learning to establish the nature of the contemporary landscape. It focuses both on work-based and on work-related learning: activities that sit under the umbrella of employer engagement. It reflects on a range of circumstances to consider what pedagogical practices may be most effective in the learning experiences that lie within the employer engagement strand and why, in what ways, and to what extent these flexible pedagogies are being engaged. Finally it presents a model for assessing flexibility and makes recommendations for further research and inquiry.

Addressing definitions: flexible pedagogies for employer engagement

This report acknowledges the changing landscape of higher education. It notes that HE providers play a crucial role both in contributing to the accumulation and critique of knowledge (research and teaching) and in the supply of those agents (graduates) who play influential roles within society, and more specifically at work. HE providers are an integral part of a supply chain to business. So higher education is both relevant for working life and also contributes to the development of working life. The challenge for HE is how to translate the requirements of working life into the educational practices in institutions. The approaches required for this are challenging pedagogically, philosophically and structurally. They involve contradictory processes within and between HE providers and the world of work (Tynjala et al 2003; Tynjala et al 2006). This is driven partly by business and policy imperatives for providers to be more responsive to employers’ needs, which include the development of employees: people who are already in the workplace. Tailoring higher education provision that reflects the needs of graduates to obtain appropriate employment is also a driver.

It is unlikely that many students enter HE without any focus on their future employment/career outcomes and it is important that this focus is given the priority it warrants. Both of these activity streams are responses to increasing demands that the relevant people in businesses and other organisations have the attributes, skills and capabilities to integrate and apply theory and specific domain/discipline knowledge with their practice, in order to maximise organisational effectiveness. They require flexible pedagogies, which must be informed by close co-operation between providers and employers, to develop curriculum/provision that a) reflects employer requirements; b) supports the development of workplaces as learning organisations; and c) ensures appropriate quality controls and standards are maintained.
The practice of employer engagement with higher education is not straightforward. One reason for this is the inherent tension in the use of commercial and academic language between the different parties. This can create barriers to collaboration between employers and HE. The HE emphasis leans towards promoting qualifications and credit recognition which are generally attractive to employees. Employer organisations however may be seeking more general business solutions which may be reactive and more closely aligned to training needs and improved employee and organisational efficiency.

So what makes flexible pedagogies for employer engagement distinctive is that flexibility and choice for the learner, the student, do not always assume primacy. Indeed learner autonomy may well be subsumed within corporate objectives and workforce development may carry more weight than individual flourishing. Employer learning requirements may not align with employee requirements. Employees entering or re-entering HE with employer support (financial or other) expect and accept that this can often mean their own personal development ambitions are compromised. HE providers need to seek a balance between these competing expectations which increase the challenge to be responsive and student-centred. It is crucial to ensure that provision is not merely a response to addressing employer training needs but that the individual learner experience is one that involves a broader exposure to high level enquiry and reflection, provides opportunity for personal development and contributes to lifelong learning.

Defining employer engagement

What it means to engage employers is nuanced. The extent of employers’ responsibility for the development of their workforce is contested. Patterns of flexibility in employee learning are constrained by structural issues beyond the control of the learning provider. This is partly due to the nature of the recent and current policy context and made more complex because the phrases ‘employer engagement’ and ‘workforce development’ have been used interchangeably by commentators. Much of the workforce development provision by HE providers in recent years has been driven by a national skills agenda. It was the Leitch report of 2006 which highlighted the need for considerable improvement in skills at intermediate and higher levels if the UK was to remain competitive globally (Leitch 2006). The report made more of an impact in England and Wales than in Scotland but it put a responsibility on HE providers to address these professional development needs flexibly, and one means was through improved employer engagement. There have been other imperatives driving the activity. For example, one means of increasing participation in HE has been through vocational or work-based qualification routes.

The intricate relationship between workforce development and graduate skills

The recent review of university-business collaborations by Wilson (2012) reinforces the need for stronger relationships between business and higher education. Wilson provides a sophisticated summary of business-university relationships and suggests these consist of a number of diverse dimensions. The relevant dimension here relates to a group of activities including in-company upskilling of employees; bespoke collaborative degree programmes; enterprise education; entrepreneurial support for staff and students and higher-level apprenticeships. In other words, this workforce development imperative is geared up to enhancing business performance. However, developing relationships with employers to find out what their business requirements are, and mapping these with graduate skills needs are also a significant part of engagement.

Much of the political focus of this agenda centres on the role of larger companies. It is important, however, to be aware of the variability of employers and sectors where there are opportunities for collaboration, particularly as the majority of businesses in the UK are small or medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Employer engagement is not a single, unified activity. Rather there are a number of approaches informed by different factors. These include the geographical context: is the engagement local, regional, national or international? What is the nature of the employing organisation? Is it well established, large, small, emergent, technical or generic? What is the prime purpose of the engagement? Is it as a supplier of graduates, or as part of a research and development endeavour, for CPD purposes or part of a longer-term or broader partnership?
Drivers impacting on the HE approach

Higher education providers’ engagement with businesses and employers is influenced by both opportunities and constraints. External and internal drivers inform the nature of provider practice. These include national policies and changing business practices that demand improved responsiveness to employer needs for workforce development. Businesses are increasingly being urged to be flexible both in relation to maintaining and increasing a competitive edge and in responding to changing economic, social and political circumstances. This means that both in the private sector and, increasingly, in the public sector organisations are required to be more agile to respond to rapid changes in the context/sector in which they operate. Garrick and Usher (2000) suggest that the changing nature of work, business and workplace culture requires learning to be flexible as a condition both to respond to and to contribute to these changes.

There are also business imperatives in this for educational institutions. HE providers globally and particularly in the UK are facing challenges. In the contemporary discourse this is dominated by pragmatic concerns about funding in the light of changing fees structure, and the need to form stronger relationships between Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) and research activity with teaching developments. Internally there is a changing dynamic in response to a range of issues. These include an increased focus on student-centred learning, aligned with widening participation and improving diversity, and using resources more efficiently in a time of economic pressure. In addition there is a growing focus on the responsiveness of the provider to meet customer demands.

Employment-based education has become a significant part of students’ formal programmes of work with experience and/or learning in occupational settings incorporated into the curriculum. Here there may be evidence of the boundaries between programmes of study on campus and those in work, dissolving to some extent although this varies across and between disciplines and subject areas. Student demands for more flexible and responsive provision is evidenced through published quality measures such as league tables, National Student Satisfaction (NSS) survey scores and quality assurance reviews.

The policy focus on graduate employment is also relevant here. This has increased inevitably as a result of the economic downturn but also because of the growing competition among global companies to employ graduates with requisite skills and knowledge. The agendas of the current coalition and previous governments, outlined in the Higher Ambitions report (BIS 2009) and ‘Students at the heart of the system’ white paper (BIS 2011), emphasise the importance of graduate skills and assert the need for providers to improve collaboration with employers.

Securing employment is no longer enough for graduates. Being able to gain and maintain employment successfully, to progress in the world of work and manage a career through self-sufficiency is very important in a rapidly changing global economic context. Graduates are now much more likely to have multiple employers and even to move from one employment sector to another. Increasingly they are leaving the context suggested or determined by their undergraduate degree studies. In addition, organisations, particularly in the STEM sectors, are increasingly looking for so-called ‘T-shaped’ people who have capabilities to solve problems, demonstrate expertise, and qualities and attributes to be effective across trans-disciplinary teams and networks (IfM/IBM 2008; Wilson 2012). There is also evidence of a growing interest in self-employment as a career option. So HE programmes need to incorporate a model of employability that not only includes subject knowledge and cognitive ability but has professional relevance, is performance orientated and facilitates learning for work as well as promoting personal values and engagement (Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011).
Another driver is the renewed focus on the student experience particularly through engaging students as partners in learning. The challenge for HE is to address this by enhancing the quality and flexibility of pedagogical approaches. These include the context of delivery, curricula construction and recognition of the impact that co-curricular and extra-curricular activities have in encouraging students to become confident individuals capable of making a full contribution to society. Staff are then charged with improving the education on offer and this includes harnessing the benefits of technological change and developing more flexible dimensions of teaching and learning.
Typology of learners in employer engagement

For this paper, a typology of learners has been constructed to provide a mechanism through which to examine why, to what extent, and how, flexible pedagogies for delivering learning may be promoted. The typology points overall to two models of learner, with each having a number of sub-sets. The unifying feature is that learning associated with employer engagement is work-based or work-related. This is pivotal and it is the site within which all aspects of flexibility, including pedagogical, must be located.

Much work-based learning takes place in contexts where, obviously, the primary purpose is work. Work cultures are different from educational cultures. There are also many different kinds of workplaces, from production lines to creative industries, large multinationals to SMEs and this will inform and impact on the opportunities for flexibility. Work-related learning takes place predominantly in educational settings, so work practices and working life are more theoretically defined and/or are practised at a more superficial or supervised level. This requires different approaches to teaching and learning, whether the subject is discipline-based or more generic/skills-based and if the emphasis is on research or professional/vocational learning and practice.

Model 1: Learner as employee/employee as learner

The first type is where the learner is in work - the learner who is already an employee, and who has a dual identity as both learner and employee. The purpose of the learning undertaken will determine the nature of the relationship with the learning provider but a constant feature is a three-way construct between the employer, the learner/employee and the provider. The need to satisfy the interests of both learner and employer intensifies the imperative for a flexible offer. The underlying question here is: does this learner work in order to learn, or does this learner learn for work? This is important because the learner situation informs the pedagogical approach. There are a number of sub-sets:

- the employer will be the driver of this relationship if the imperative is to upskill the workforce and to develop knowledge and competences as part of a talent management or succession-planning programme. If the learning activity is crucial to increased profitability and efficiency, or business success, and the employer is driving the provision, the employers’ role assumes primacy in a workforce development context;

Example: employer-led provision

Morrisons, one of the UK’s largest retailers of fresh food producers, has a corporate degree programme that offers undergraduates a salaried job while studying for a BSc in Management and Business from the University of Bradford, School of Management. This is an example of employer-responsive provision developed in partnership to provide a contextualised and bespoke curriculum. (available at http://www.bradford.ac.uk/management/programmes/undergraduate/corporate/management-and-business-morrisons/)

- the employer may be the driver but the learning is for a specific or regulatory purpose, such as to obtain a professional qualification necessary to practise. In this case, a fourth stakeholder, a professional or statutory body (SSP) enters the equation and may place limits on flexibility through, for example, curriculum content requirements or even push for greater flexibility. Examples are well-established Department of Health and Social Care funded programmes in England working with health and social care professional regulatory bodies;
- the learner may be studying to improve their own circumstances and their ultimate purpose is to achieve goals with respect to personal and professional development. Here the context, employee development, is
more personalised. This may or may not include an employer input and the employee may not want to share their learning with the employer at all but this is an aspect of lifelong learning. Whatever the circumstance the provider is a central player;

Example: a flexible approach by a provider

An example shared during the preparation of this report is the delivery of a part-time honours degree on Sundays by an HE provider. This was done because the self-funded students in the main did not want their employers to know they were undertaking the course as they felt this would jeopardise working relations. In this case the students worked in a sector where engagement with HE is uncommon and their motivations may be viewed with suspicion or as disloyalty. Others were denied paid time off to study so there was a demand for flexible access and teaching time.

Model 2: Learner as HE student in preparation for work

The second model of employer engagement relates to the learner who is using a work-related learning activity to develop their knowledge either as part of a recognised programme of study or to supplement such a programme. The learning may be work-based. The three-way relationship remains but the driver is generally the provider who needs to negotiate a relationship with the employer supplying the learning context. The employability/graduate skills debate is more pressing here. The underlying question is: does the learner undertake this to become a better worker or/and to enhance the learning experience? There are three permutations:

- the learner may need evidence of practice as part of the qualification/programme and the provider will need to ensure this happens to fulfil accreditation requirements. This is the case particularly with employer-sector-sponsored vocational/professional programmes; for example KPMG, the professional services company, works with Durham University and the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, to integrate fully the practical, professional and academic aspects of accountancy;
- the learner may be accessing work placements to develop a range of generic skills to enhance their employability as part of their programme of study. This may be independent from the provider but more likely with the support and assistance of the provider. This is often directed in accordance with discipline requirements;
- the learner’s study programme incorporates activities that may enhance the knowledge, skills and attributes required for working life. These activities may be provided indirectly or directly to the learner by employers. The HE provider is the broker of this learning which is often a substitute for actual work experiences.

Example: Brokering employer-mentor roles

The Learner Voice is a pilot mentoring scheme for students at five North West universities. Supported by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) via a Teaching Development Grant, as well as the Construction Industry Council (CIC) and the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB), the project focuses on benefiting full-time undergraduate mentees by helping them to link the theory of the university course to real work-place practice. It is intended to help prepare them for work by putting them in direct contact with people already there. The mentors are able to take up networking opportunities and can record their activity as CPD (available from: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/teaching-development-grants/individual-round-1/enhancing-graduate-employability).
This typology raises questions about flexible pedagogy and how it is conceptualised:

- is flexible pedagogy for employer engagement about facilitating flexible access to lifelong learning, in whatever form it may take, for whoever wants or demands it? or;
- is it a set of learning options constructed to build ‘a flexible and customised system that addresses the lifelong learning and skills training needs of existing and potential workers in concert with the skills demanded by employers’? (Gatta 2005, p.5)
What informs flexible pedagogies for employer engagement?

This section of the report reviews the evidence with which to identify and assess what forms flexible pedagogies for employer engagement may take and the extent to which they are deployed. It explores relevant literature associated with flexible pedagogies and draws on exemplars. Overall, there is scant literature available addressing the specific theme of flexible pedagogies and even less considering pedagogies for employer engagement. Indeed, it is questionable whether employer engagement as a concept is aligned to a pedagogic approach. Rather it generally falls into a number of indirect but related learning situations or categories the exact nature of which will inform the opportunities and constraints relating to flexibility.

Much of the discourse loosely associated with employer engagement, of learning through or at work, generally falls within the narrower domains of work-related and work-based learning although the defining features of either of these in relation to higher education is not clear. A plethora of labels is deployed in the literature: work-place learning, work-focused learning, work-related learning, workforce development, higher level learning, higher level skills development, work experience, experiential learning, continuing professional development, employability, graduate skills and graduate attributes. This creates over-complexity, so for this report, the two categories used are work-based learning and work-related learning.

Flexible learning and employer engagement

Flexible learning has been a part of adult-education discourse and practice for decades but it does suffer from a lack of shared understanding of the concept. This can create barriers to practising it responsibly and rigorously (Thompson and Kearns 2011). More recently, the significant literature exploring flexible learning and its pedagogies has its origin in the discourse on technological developments and some of the ideology, principles and practical considerations explored are relevant to employer engagement, although not expressed specifically in relation to it.

Collis and Moonen (2001) provide a powerful framework for examining flexible learning which considers the many dimensions necessary for developing a flexible approach to teaching and learning, taking into account new technologies. These have resonance with the need for a flexible pedagogy for employer engagement. They propose 19 dimensions of learning flexibility which they differentiate into five broader categories: entry requirements; time; content; instructional approach; and resources, delivery and logistics. They suggest that a pedagogy for flexible teaching and learning requires a combination of approaches moving from a more traditional acquisition model, (where the emphasis is on the acquisition of pre-specified knowledge and the development of predetermined concepts ) through to a participatory model. This is becoming more common in constructivist approaches to pedagogy for work-based and work-related learning where learners can join in communities of practice around projects and individual learning contracts. In addition a contribution-orientated model provides the opportunity for learners to inform the body of knowledge and to develop new knowledge themselves. This is a helpful framework for addressing flexible pedagogies, as it can be applied in multiple contexts, and not just for distance or online education. However the authors acknowledge the considerable constraints - institutional, implementation-related, pedagogic, and technological - that influence the actual experience of flexibility (Collis and Moonen 2011).

Similarly Campbell, Gibson and Gibson (2011) assert that any conceptualisation of flexibility should be both operational and situational. Operational flexibility relating to place, pace and mode is bound up with a situational understanding of flexibility informed by both driving forces (government priorities and policies, employer and learner demand) and restraining forces (competing priorities, unfunded demands and cultures that are wary of shifting a well-established and familiar learning environment).

Elizabeth Burge (2011) also notes the social, economic and political influences on the discourse round flexible learning developments. She acknowledges the influence of pilot HEA programmes for technology enhanced
learning adding to the discourse on student-focused and flexible systems. These projects have been informed by changing student expectations, especially return-on-study investments and career development concerns as well as wider political imperatives urging increased choice. One example of an online development outlined by Bradley and Oliver (2001) noted the difficulties too in defining pedagogy for developing such provision for work-based learners.

Burge cites the work of Moore (2006) suggesting a three-fold typology for assessing flexibility. This encompasses structures, dialogue and control. When flexibility is introduced into the learning there is inevitably less structure. This may offer greater dialogue between teachers and learners to give more control to learners. This is particularly relevant when employers and employees are involved.

The HEA Flexible Learning Pathfinder project was also stimulated by a political focus on assessing the benefits of prior-learning assessment, accelerated programmes, and flexible teaching strategies and has raised some interesting questions about who should benefit from the flexibility. The compelling evidence from these projects is that a pedagogic approach which places a central focus on learning outcomes with individual activities matched to work-related objectives, and personalised learning matched to employer needs, is likely to be most successful (HEA 2009). Done successfully, all interested parties should benefit from this flexibility. However Willems (2011) asserts that flexible learning is conceptualised differently from the point of view of different stakeholders. So providers, employers and learners may have diverging opinions and understanding of what flexible learning is and should be. Gunn (2011) suggests, however, that it is teachers who are the key drivers in developing and understanding the pedagogy associated with flexible learning. Kirkpatrick (2011) indicates caution as there may be limits to how much flexibility is acceptable to ensure stakeholders do not feel the system is chaotic.

While most of the literature on flexible learning makes assumptions about the types of learners involved in the different models of flexibility, there is little specific literature addressing flexible pedagogies and work-based learning. Rather it is assumed that flexible learning provides a responsive platform to engage in learning that is work based.

Example: Flexible access to higher education learning

Middlesex University’s Institute for Work-Based Learning allows customised learning to meet the needs of individual learners as well as employer organisations at all levels from undergraduate to doctoral, and in packages of different volumes of credit. The Institute provides an entirely flexible, responsive offer that draws on a range of pedagogies to support work-based learning including accreditation of prior experiential learning and recognition of employer-delivered training and learning. Its operation is clearly underpinned by balancing tensions between structure, dialogue and control. The Doctorate in Professional Studies (DProf) at Middlesex University, led by the Institute is open to all professional areas as the focus is defined by the individual’s area of activity and their own unique area of interest. So the approach is inter-professional and trans-disciplinary, because its primary concern is with knowledge that is generated and used in practice (available from: http://www.mdx.ac.uk/aboutus/Schools/iwbl/index.aspx).
Work-based learning

Work-based learning has been defined as:

‘… linking learning to the work role, but this does not only mean preparing for a specific job. Three strands have been identified: learning for work, learning at work, and learning through work’ (Brennan and Little 1996, p.8).

Work-based learning is often associated with workforce development. There is no common definition of what workforce development really means in the context of higher education, but it does involve providing the opportunity for people to undertake higher level learning to develop knowledge as well as vocational, professional and technical competences so that they can apply these more effectively at work. So the learning needs to be relevant to the requirements of the employer. However it can also provide opportunities for individual career progression through self-directed and lifelong learning. Sometimes professional development may be needed for compliance and registration/recognition purposes. Learning may lead to progression through achievement of qualifications and credits in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (NI) at Level 4 or above (or Level 7 and above in Scotland), and includes degrees, foundation degrees, higher national certificates and diplomas, NVQs/SVQs Level 4 and 5 and other professional qualifications or development awards. However, significantly, workforce development activity may also include non-accredited higher education learning.

Eraut and Hirsh (2007) provide an assessment of the nature of workplace learning to arrive at an understanding of why and how employees may engage in it, and how it is organised and facilitated. Boud and Solomon (2001) provide a framework for such learning relevant for higher education. They identify specific characteristics that they ascribe to work-based learning. These are:

- a partnership between an external organisation and an educational organisation to foster learning;
- learners being employees;
- a programme of learning derived from the needs of the workplace and the learner;
- recognition of prior learning;
- learning undertaken in the workplace;
- providers assessing outcomes of negotiated learning within a framework of standards/levels which is transdisciplinary.

Operationally, learning activities may take place at work but may be combined with learning on the HE campus. Higher level study is generally delivered around employees’ existing commitments and offers flexibility in design and content. This form of flexible learning considers the pace, place and mode of the learning as well as being dynamic and sensitive to the preferences of learners or sponsors of the learning (eg the employers).

Example: Tailored flexible work-based learning

The University of Chester has a well-established Centre for Work Related Studies providing expertise on accredited and negotiated workplace learning. The Centre promotes a ‘learning through work’ approach and is popular with professionals and employers. The Centre will accredit an employer’s in-house training (or learning and development activities); provide learning programmes responsive to employees and related to the workplace, including developing work-based or work-related projects which can have a direct impact on workplace activity. The Centre provides ‘tailored work-based flexible learning qualifications’. Programmes can be delivered distance and online and with other approved providers (available from: http://www.chester.ac.uk/cwrs).
Policy initiatives

There have been a number of government-funded initiatives to enhance employer engagement activity within and among HE providers in recent years. In England, foundation degrees (Fd) were introduced in 2001 and Foundation Degree Forward (FdF) was established in 2003 to support and facilitate their development. It had a very clear focus on embedding employer engagement in these Level 5 qualifications. The development of more Fds is under review in Wales and Northern Ireland. Some foundation degrees have been developed with a group of industry partners. Others are closed courses tailor-made for individual businesses, including for example the McDonalds Foundation Degree in Managing Business Operations, designed and developed in partnership with the awarding institution Manchester Metropolitan University, which also provides qualifications for Tesco and Booths supermarkets (available from: http://www.mmu.ac.uk/news/articles/1384/).

There are currently over 2900 Fd courses listed on the UCAS website delivered across England, Wales and NI in a range of provider institutions and delivered online, through distance learning, part-time, full-time and as block/day release or sandwich courses. Recently new higher level apprenticeships are being trialled with foundation degrees as the academic learning element and delivered jointly between colleges, HE providers and employers. These programmes have elements of flexibility within their design and delivery.

Example: Foundation degree development with a professional body

Anglia Ruskin University runs a foundation degree in the Management of Social and Affordable Housing which is accredited by the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH). It has been designed in consultation with employers with no assumptions made about content, delivery or location within the university disciplines. The learning themes include personal effectiveness, management skills; legislative and organisational change and managing customers and clients. Individual learners will build on their knowledge to improve their own personal performance (available from: http://www.anglia.ac.uk/ruskin/en/home/prospectus/ugpt/MSAH.html).

An English initiative, the Higher Level Skills Pathfinders (funded by HEFCE 2006 to 2010), was established to find ways of connecting employers and higher education (HE) on a regional basis. Their work aimed both to increase demand from employers and help HE respond to them by developing learning appropriate for the workplace (HEFCE 2008). A contemporaneous HEFCE funded initiative involved a range of Employer Engagement projects across 39 HE providers as part of its Workforce Development Programme. The programme evaluation suggests that regional agencies, sector skills councils, professional bodies and business organisations have all made a clear commitment to closer working. Impact includes the increasing use by HE providers of a much wider range of business development and marketing interventions, the adaptation of accreditation and quality assurance processes to be more appropriate for the demands of the employer market, and there is also evidence that HE providers involved have become more business-like and professional in their approach to employers. Some have undergone transformational change, reorienting their mission to differentiate their offer in an increasingly competitive market while others have not found it easy to engage their academic staff. What is significant is that while the HEFCE programme has promoted access to and progress through HE for a wide range of learners, little attention has been made to capturing evidence of emerging and transforming pedagogies to facilitate the policy initiative (HEFCE 2011). The learning from these pilot projects, indicating the need to challenge internal structures and processes to become more responsive to employers, is relevant to this discussion. The internal structures and processes are pivotal for the development of learning programmes that are responsive to employer needs.
Reflecting on these initiatives confirms that the needs and expectations of employee learners, and the organisations they work for, can be very different from traditional undergraduate and postgraduate learners. Providers have been engaged with developing and enhancing pedagogical approaches which are facilitative and supportive of learning in the workplace. This has been done by moving away from traditional structures and processes, particularly in course development, to shared ownership of the curriculum. In some cases bespoke, smaller/bite-sized learning programmes have been developed which provide the opportunity for flexible delivery and learning achievements. This has been essential to ensure that the student experience is optimised and that knowledge gained from the workplace is integrated with higher level learning.

More recently, the National HE STEM Programme in England and Wales had a strand relating to workforce development and higher level skills. The projects funded had a remit to develop new models of flexible provision, revisit the curriculum and involve employers in the development, design and delivery of courses. The projects reviewed structures and processes and also benefited from collaborations with employers, employer brokers and forums to facilitate closer engagement (Smith and Kettle 2012, unpublished).

**Example: Accrediting work-based learning to support progression in higher education**

One of the National HE STEM Programme Regional Action Plan Projects, at Northumbria University, involved exploring the accreditation of short units of learning to address the transition from Level 3 to Level 4 in STEM subjects. A work-based learning framework was developed to enable the accreditation of in-house training and education programmes across a range of STEM employers to provide a flexible programme of study. Alongside accumulating credit for recognition of CPD, learners also undertake a work-based learning project/independent study and a reflective managing learning module, leading to the award of a Certificate of Higher Education.

This considerable expansion of workforce development activity at HE level has seen a pragmatic approach developed to work-based learning built around structural and organisational constraints (White 2012).

**Work-based learning pedagogies**

The supporting literature that underpins the practice of work-based learning is dominated by the concept of adults undertaking lifelong learning based in a workplace but with strong links to an educational institution. Learning theories drawn on in support of this work reflect this. The central role of the learner as an adult is influential on the approach taken to teaching and learning. There is continuing debate around the place for a pedagogy specifically related to adult learning. The discussion concerns the concept of andragogy and is clearly articulated by Knowles et al (2011). The premise is that it is the learning process itself that is the central concern and not the ultimate aims or goals of the learning. The approach taken to facilitating this involves a model that builds on learning transactions with six core principles specifically applicable to the adult learning situation:

- the learners need to know;
- the self-concept of the learner;
- prior experience of the learner;
- readiness to learn;
- orientation to learning;
- motivation to learn (Knowles et al 2011 p.3).
Consequently, in work-based learning where the student (employee) is engaged in a lifelong learning activity, these principles of learning come into play. Reischmann (2011, p.342) describes the androgogical approach as ‘the science of the lifelong and life-wide education and learning of adults’. It can include intentional learning such as from the work place but also recognises non-intentional contexts. A challenge for HE providers is to develop teaching approaches that recognise these formal and informal learning contexts in the construction of curriculum, learning outcomes and individual learning contracts (Jackson 2011, Barnett 2010).

An alternate proposition for a more appropriate approach to engaging with learners in a variety of work-based and professional contexts uses principles whereby:

- learners reflect on what they learn;
- learners reflect on how they learn it;
- educators enable learners to teach themselves.

This has been described as an heutagogical approach to teaching and learning, which places an emphasis on the development of learners to be highly autonomous, self-determined and well-prepared for the complexities of the workplace (Blaschke 2012). This is particularly pertinent in terms of acquiring professionally orientated capability and knowledge. As such it lends itself to meeting the needs of a multi-faceted set of contexts. However it places full control of all aspects on the learner and this may create challenges for all involved.

Ashton and Elliot (2007), for example, describe a blended learning approach for an early childhood education course which provided flexible options for students. Most students indicated a preference for the continuance of some face-to-face classes but the role of educators as knowledge brokers is highlighted. Similarly Canning (2010), in a report on a foundation degree in early years, identifies a move away from pedagogy to heutagogy as the learners emerged feeling confident and capable through their own motivations to create learning opportunities and became their own regulators of reflection. They were developing the dispositions of both learners and employees. Both examples cited describe a sophisticated and advanced pedagogical approach.

While this can be constructed as the epitome of flexibility the reference to the employer interest or influence is notable by its absence. This is crucially important when considering the value of this approach for the employer engagement context.

More mainstream characteristics underpinning the pedagogic approach to work-based learning can be identified as including:

- student-centred learning as the predominant approach;
- authentic learning, using real-life tasks or simulated tasks that provide the learner with opportunities to connect with the real world (Lombardi 2007, McClune and Entwistle 2010);
- situated learning, taking place in the context where it is to be applied, in this case, work (Unwin et al 2005, Eraut and Hirsch 2007, Felstead et al 2011);
- experiential learning, with a focus on reflection on carrying out specific activities;
- networked learning, either in formal or informal settings;
- reflective learning using critical thinking, self-awareness and analytical skills (Brockbank and McGill 2007, Swan and Fox 2009);
- alternative assessments, often used to encourage student involvement in their own assessment.

Reflection on the learning derived from work practices (or from other life-wide contexts) lends itself to a constructivist pedagogic approach. Again the emphasis is on the process of learning itself with the student placed at the centre of the creation and utilisation of knowledge. Constructivist approaches continue to be developed, particularly with the growing use of new technologies and access to knowledge from and through many different media. The tool used is often problem-based learning; learning from practice and experiences and reflecting on those experiences.
Murphy (1997) summarises some of the different characteristics associated with constructivist approaches and her checklist emphasises how multiple perspectives and representations of concepts and content are presented and encouraged. The teacher’s role is considered as facilitator, coach or tutor rather than instructor. Any goals or objectives are derived by the student or in negotiation with the teacher or system. But the facilitator provides activities, opportunities, tools and environments to encourage metacognition, self-analysis, regulation and reflection. Assessment is authentic and interwoven with teaching.

Although the constructivist approach does not clearly align itself to notions of flexibility, nevertheless there are elements of flexibility within it particularly when the learning is derived from the workplace and involves student-centred learning (Collis and Moonen 2001).

Costley et al (2009) provide an evaluation of work-based learning in an extensive literature review which informs an understanding of appropriate pedagogies. Costley and Dikerdem (2011) follow this up with a full review of those pedagogies. The broad spectrum of activity encompasses a number of options ranging from a degree in work-based studies to work placements within a subject-based degree programme. This is operationalised through the work of the Institute of Work-based Learning at Middlesex University, referred to earlier. It opens up the concept of what work-based learning can be. Common elements across a range of models include:

- accreditation of certificated or experiential learning;
- learning agreements with employers as well as learners;
- location of learning in the workplace or ‘work’ as the subject of learning;
- workplace- or professional-practice-related ‘applied’ projects.

Pulled together, these approaches to teaching and learning have the potential to make a flexible pedagogic offer.

### Example: A collaborative approach to providing flexible learning provision

The Sheffield City Region Leadership Programme is a collaboration between the University of Sheffield, Sheffield City Council and Sheffield Business School at Sheffield Hallam University. There were other participating organisations, all from the public sector including the Sheffield NHS Trusts, Rotherham Town Council, Sheffield Fire and Rescue Service and the South Yorkshire police. In the context of financial stringency and the need for the sustainability with two very different universities working together, what emerged was a city region leadership programme in the form of a postgraduate certificate. This was an accredited collaborative leadership programme that was not described as a course but rather as an investment programme. This flexible development incorporated different types of learning including deliberate practice (learning by being told and learning by doing) moving through into social learning and learning by reflection. Four programme components are supported with masterclasses, individual coaching and learning sets. The learning activities are based on real-world projects including for example how to use social marketing to reduce the incidence of serious road traffic accidents (Nicholson and Sturges 2012).

Some authors suggest that rather than the student being the focus of the pedagogic approach it is the situation that influences the approach selected. The work-based learning becomes the field of study, where work itself is the focus of learning and inquiry. Portwood (2007) argues for an epistemology for work-based learning defining the distinctive nature of the learning that is derived in this way.
Costley and Dikerdem (2011) cite the work of Nottingham (2011, unpublished) who presents a typology of differentiating work-based learning perspectives in the higher education system, with each influencing a nuanced approach to flexible pedagogy and delivery: a discipline-centred perspective; a learner-centred approach and an employer-centred perspective. This gives another dimension to the understanding of the concept of flexibility in work-based learning being dependent on the perspective of the central players. A discipline-centred perspective is often the most commonly described when full-time undergraduate and postgraduate learners undertake work experiences such as placements as an established part of a professionally accredited programme in, for example, engineering, biosciences, business and computing, or health and education. Flexibility is required within the programme to ensure the work-based learning takes place.

Example: HE and employers working together for workforce development

A workforce development toolkit, designed to support health and social care employers working more closely with HE providers as part of a planned workforce redesign project, was implemented by the West Yorkshire Lifelong Learning Network. Designed to break down barriers to understanding between employers and HE providers the toolkit explains how existing workplace knowledge may be translated into evidence of formal learning. This provides the opportunity for supported progression into HE level study and professional development (Smith and Kettle 2011).

While flexible pedagogy is an elastic concept, it is not the same as logistical or operational flexibility (delivering what the learner wants, when they want it), rather it relates to learner choice in flexible learning contexts (delivering what the learner wants, how they want it). So a flexible pedagogy may be more oriented to the process of learning rather than the process of accumulating academic credit, for example. It may be built more holistically on learner experiences. It is a combination of processes.

To summarise, in work-based learning provision, content is created regularly by the learner from work activity and requires three-way negotiations between employer, provider and student. The context is generally the workplace rather than the discipline area. Any prior learning is agreed in a learning contract. Assessment draws on workplace activity, analysis and reflection and fits within generally determined learning outcomes. This articulates a range of pedagogic approaches and practical arrangements that come together to provide the scaffold for an identifiable pedagogy for work-based learning.
Work-related learning

Work-related learning is a broader concept than work-based or workplace learning and here it includes work experiences and employability developments. Work-related learning involves learning for, at and through work. It includes learning which is formal and informal, assessed and not assessed. Work-related learning can be experienced in a range of settings and undertaken in a variety of ways. The concept of flexible learning and pedagogies are explored within the context of work-related learning. Literature explicitly addressing flexible pedagogy in work-related learning that also assesses employer engagement is lacking. Evidence suggests that pedagogic practices relating to this do vary considerably across the HE landscape.

Employability development is one part of work-related learning in higher education. Relevant and necessary skills are identified through engagement with business and employer groups to inform HE providers about what they seek in graduates (CBI 2009). This provides an employer perspective reflecting the changing nature of the workplace and notes the emerging requirements for flexible workers with a broader skill set, including cross-disciplinary knowledge, creativity, innovation and customer responsiveness for knowledge-based employment (Holland 2006, Tynjala et al 2006). Flexibility is certainly implicit within guides and reports on graduate outcomes and preparation for the world of work.

The debate on employability pedagogy in HE was led through the HEA-published ESECT series (HEA 2006). Yorke and Knight (2006) suggest that an employability curriculum involves students in developing understandings about work; skilful practices (the deployment of skills in different and/or new situations); efficacy beliefs (legitimate self-confidence in one’s capacities to achieve and succeed at work) as well as metacognitive capabilities. These ideas are developed by Little (2006) on work-based learning and Moreland (2006) on work-related learning and they provide a framework for considering the place of employer engagement within the field.

A recent updated version of the ESECT guide, Pedagogy for Employability (Pegg et al 2012), asserts that an employability curriculum involves higher education students in developing a range of competencies beyond their discipline-based understanding and knowledge. These include skilful practices in context and a particular approach to personal development and career planning. Significantly the message is that learning for employability can be subsumed or embedded into the learning practices related to a discipline or any other context in higher education.

Example: An optional work-related learning activity

A project designed to alert students to the nature and importance of graduate skills was carried out by the Midlands and East Anglia Legacy Project and led by the University of Birmingham. It brought together local employers and students through the development of a four-week internship delivered at the university but with input from employers. The programme provided Level 6 students with the opportunity of working on ‘real-world’ projects in mixed teams. The module included facilitated sessions on team building, problem solving and communication, skills assessment and logging, peer assessment and reflection. Employers were recruited to contribute to the design and delivery of a work ‘challenge’ to ensure that the programme had relevance for businesses and addressed some of the skills deficits. They assessed the outcome of the challenge. This increased the resonance and impact for students. The employer involvement happened over a short space of time but was both extensive and intensive.

The Scottish QAA Enhancement Programme has identified three strands relevant to the pedagogy for employability development: embedding employability within the curriculum; enhancing students’ employability through the co-curriculum; and engaging employers in developing the curriculum (QAA 2009). The programme suggests nine types of approaches: work-based learning; work-related learning; industry in the lecture room; industry advising the curriculum; business mentoring relationships; accreditation programmes;
simulation of working conditions; employability modules; sponsorship. Co-curricular activity has been described as a structured programme of activity leading to a university award which may be accredited, or a university-facilitated programme of events which do not lead to an award but can be useful to enhance the student experience and employability (1994 Group 2009). A project led by the University of Glasgow suggested such learning should be integral and supported within the primary learning programme (Bell et al 2010). Lemanski et al (2011) endorse work-based learning as a flexible tool and that discipline modules can be developed in a three-way collaboration with employers, providers and learners.

Bosanquet (2011) conceptualises a range of teaching and learning styles suited to work-related learning in four broad domains: behaviourism (the teacher transmits knowledge), cognitivism (the teacher facilitates learning), constructivism (the teacher collaborates with students to construct knowledge) and an emerging theory of connectivism, where students create knowledge that is mediated by the teacher. Examples include developing learning activities that are more student centred and involve sharing learning with peers and with teachers. These can include experiments, field trips/observations, games, model building, role plays, simulations and surveys. These provide authentic, situated learning and involve reflection but as Yorke and Knight (2006) note students need regular reiteration of the purpose of these activities and support to help evaluate their own achievements.

**Example: Work-related learning simulation activity**

At the University of Strathclyde, lecturers from the Department of Architecture have developed an approach to professional simulations called SIMPLE (simulated professional learning environment). The SIMPLE project has been funded jointly by JISC and the Higher Education Academy through the UK Centre for Legal Education. One of its aims is to create a simulation environment that can be used in a variety of contexts and it bridges learning on traditional academic programmes and CPD activities. The activity that the learners undertake involves professional role play. It is constructed in such a way that students are able to do this at a much deeper level than is possible in a traditional classroom setting. The scenarios have all been developed by practitioners. It involves group work and reflection all set within a structure that deploys scenarios to be carried out in real time. This approach is transactional learning as it goes beyond learning about practice to learning from practice (Agapiou et al 2010).

Very few HE providers incorporate a life-wide approach into their conceptualisation of the employability agenda but there are opportunities for recognising the learning from the paid and unpaid work experiences of many students. Such extra-curricular activities are more student-led (part-time work for example) but also include non-academic pursuits including volunteering, community or enterprise activities outside university life that benefit learner development and may be highly valued by employers. An example from Manchester Metropolitan University outlined here demonstrates this.

**Example: Developing a co-curricular approach**

Ogilvie and Homan (2012) report how they developed, at Manchester Metropolitan University Business School, a 20 credit elective work-based learning unit designed for business students who are in part-time low-level jobs to fund their progress through university. The work experience here is not an organised placement, so the learning has been directed to focus on generic organisational topics such as stakeholders, structure, culture, communication, health and safety as well broader business issues of waste and quality. The challenge was to design a unit that was flexible and achievable (using a variety of work patterns, including voluntary work and in organisations of any size), but which also ensured quality and academic robustness. The unit is supported with workshops, delivered as a blended learning programme and uses short assignment tasks. In this example the providers’ direct engagement with the employers is minimal if at all. The emphasis here is on the students acting as brokers for their own learning between employer and provider.
Bullock et al (2012) warn that learning gained from the placements generally cannot be replicated through work-related learning activities nor can it be achieved in less structured types of work experience. This then challenges the pedagogic approach. The emphasis within work-related practices or work-placement learning is on reflection and ensuring the learner gains from the practice through learning to learn and using new knowledge gained in an effective way. Lucas and Tan (2007) suggest a pedagogic framework for developing reflective practice in students.

Example: Real-world reflective practice

An experiential-based initiative in entrepreneurship education has been implemented at the University of Limerick through the development of business consulting module. The primary aim of the module is to provide students with practical hands-on experience of engaging with a small business or community groups by providing a consultancy service to identify and solve their business problems. Students work in teams of five to six, visit clients who have been selected by the academic leads and/or hold online meetings and gain experience of business practices in operation. On completion of the module, the client obtains a written consultancy report providing a set of solutions and recommendations to address the initial problem. A variety of delivery methods are applied to adhere to the expectations of the different stakeholders (students, faculty members and the client). Lectures are used only at the onset of the module, with action learning the main approach through collaborative team activities, goal-driven tasks, intellectual discovery activities that heighten critical thinking in a practical context. Guest speakers and mini case studies are introduced to encourage understanding and skills development. The lecturer adopts the roles of facilitator and challenger and limits the instructional approach. Students are assessed individually on a weekly basis through the submission of a project log which forms the basis of recording individual reflective practice (Hynes et al 2011).

So the emphasis in work-related learning is in practices both within, alongside and external to the curriculum. Each approach requires different models of flexibility and pedagogy. Engagement with employers can be an optional element of these. All may be considered as an adjunct to or as part of the learning programme. They may or may not directly engage or require the engagement of employers. The literature is less helpful with the articulation of the pedagogic approaches. Some things can be assumed, for example work-related classroom activities are generally described in a constructivist approach. This asserts that learners are encouraged to construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through reflecting on their own experiences; that knowledge is constructed rather than acquired. Such methods include problem solving, they require group/team approaches, and they are often based on employer-derived real-world problems. These activities may be embedded within the curriculum and providers have taken a whole university, a faculty or course-level approach to achieving this, which in itself demands flexibility. Equally, work experiences demand flexible programmes to allow them to take place. Different approaches can be taken in managing these experiences, including the use of work-based mentors, reflective journals and portfolios.

Employability development in HE aims to provide opportunities for students to gain experiences in practices that are considered most useful in contributing to their current or future working life and contribution to civic society. This requires graduates who are prepared for a rapidly changing and super-complex world. Barnett (2006) suggests this requires an ‘ontological shift’ in the dispositions and qualities of graduates to become ‘authentic’. This is a lifetime project. The undergraduate or postgraduate learning journeys are just phases of this project (Holland 2006). To encourage such authentic dispositions there is a need to face exposure to situations with multiple descriptions and identities and this involves value conflict. Barnett also notes the ontological challenges to HE itself brought about by this state of super complexity, and the need to respond with appropriate learning to meet the unknown future (Barnett 2012). Flexible pedagogic practices can address this to some extent, especially when there are multiple influences (employers, employees, learners) on approaches to teaching (Lea and Callaghan 2005).
Tynjala et al (2006) explore the links between higher education and working life and suggest the challenge for providers is to develop provision that not only has currency and relevance but that also translates the activities of working life into educational practices. Engagement with employers directly contributes to this but the requirement presents pedagogical, institutional and cultural challenges for providers that are complex and contradictory.
Flexible pedagogy for employer engagement: why, to what extent and in what ways?

The review of the employer engagement landscape has reinforced its complexity and raised a number of questions. The first of these is why should providers want to get involved with developing an employer-responsive pedagogy? Clarity about motivation will both inform the nature of the pedagogic approach and determine the boundaries of its flexibility.

Pedagogy in this context is fundamental, yet it has no regular shape or form; it is fluid. Ultimately, these pedagogies are the outcomes of choices made and decisions taken to frame the broader learning culture, in this case the workplace. Flexible pedagogies for employer engagement will be deployed to enhance the learner experience. Learners should have the best possible experience in relation to their own situation. In the context of employer responsive pedagogy, every situation may be different. So flexible approaches may be deployed to manage learner demands and expectation in a changing landscape and one where both the learner and employer voices carry increasing weight.

How much flexibility may be introduced into teaching and learning practices may be influenced by a number of drivers which carry as much weight as the enhancement of the learning experience. Ontological considerations driving institutional missions are inextricably linked with the resources, delivery and logistics required for effective practice.

A plethora of HE practices can be described as flexible; indeed many (including Open University, London Metropolitan University and Plymouth University) advertise flexible learning opportunities and a flexible approach on their websites as part of their mainstream offer. Being flexible and using flexible pedagogies to engage with students may well exist in the absence of an employer engagement strategy. However, to be a player in the employer engagement landscape there is an underlying structural and philosophical consideration. Believing in the employer engagement agenda is a crucial part of determining what pedagogies might be deployed to be successful. In other words, adopting flexible pedagogies for employer engagement relies on the belief that this is necessary for institutional success.

Why embrace flexible pedagogy?

Flexible pedagogies for employer engagement may be promoted as part of a pragmatic business proposition if providers see themselves as being a player in this market. This may be part of a mission to develop strong collaborations with business. This is an intrinsic component of a particular institutional approach. An example is the University of Hertfordshire, describing itself as the ‘leading business-facing university in the UK’ which in practice means that that ‘every course at the university is developed with input from employers, while research is designed and conducted with the aim of solving business problems and generating new and innovative applications for existing knowledge’ (available from: http://www.herts.ac.uk/about-us/vision).

Flexible approaches to pedagogical developments can be a way of making higher level learning more understandable to employers, which in turn will support collaborations and break down barriers. Employers may be cautious in approaching HE providers because of their perceived academic elitism and traditional instructional approaches to higher level learning. Employer organisations do take time to understand the world of higher education and that the delivery of any learning has to fit in with a framework of benchmarks and level indicators. Building up structural capital through closer communication and engagement with employers can open up dialogue to recognise opportunities for learning in the workplace and more flexibility can support transition into higher education for both organisations and individuals.
Example: Understanding employer needs through improved communication

The University of Exeter’s HE STEM Regional Action Plan project reinforced the importance of university-employer collaborations by developing a shared understanding about employers within the South West region, what their requirements are and how HE providers can respond to them. The project provided the opportunity to explore local business leaders’ perceptions of HE and, in particular, how HE could support their enterprise. The project has researched HE providers’ understanding and used this market intelligence to develop and test systems and processes that would help their staff to discuss higher level training needs and provision more effectively with employers.

Flexible pedagogies may be deployed as part of a response to foster capability within employer organisations. An example of this has built on the work of Foundation Degree Forward (FdF) where the EBTA service facilitates partnerships between higher education providers and employers and enables the accreditation of higher education levels of training that employers provide for their staff (available from: http://ebta.qaa.ac.uk/). This approach has been mirrored by a range of providers.

Example: Developing wrapper modules to recognise and enhance workplace learning

Harper Adams University in partnership with the Royal Agricultural College has developed an approach that meets the needs of employers in rural areas. A curriculum response accredits existing employer provision through a ‘wrapper module’. The learning occurs through a range of processes that include connecting the development of core knowledge or competencies (from the existing training) to bodies of literature, exploring related current sector issues and analysing the impact of new knowledge upon practice and organisational improvement. Learners are encouraged to reflect on the processes of learning in the workplace and explore the impact and implications of this. The wrapper module draws on elements of personal and professional development. Activities often use an inquiry-based approach and include designing and undertaking skills audits, analysing learning preferences, assessing sector skills needs, assessing organisational needs, critically experiencing and analysing a range of learning experiences, maintaining a learning journal and systematically reflecting upon learning experiences.

The wrapper module concept is a reusable curriculum tool that enables flexible content and has relevance for employers and learners. The HE teacher becomes a facilitator of work-based learning rather than a content provider. The wrapper module design facilitates the formation of transdisciplinary, relevant, co-created knowledge that is both fit for practice and academically robust (Arnold 2011).

Developing capability of the HE workforce to respond to the business needs of the employer by sharing responsibility for learning is part of the changing perception of what the university is for. Ensuring HE staff have contemporary workplace experiences can bring mutual benefits. In some cases the academic learning is delivered jointly by the employer.

Example: Responding to regional business needs

Gateshead College developed the ‘Science of low-carbon vehicle technology’ project with an ambition to help staff to better understand the needs of local industry. In an emerging electric and low carbon vehicle manufacturing industry, the college has benefited from the use of teacher placements in industries, going into businesses for one day a week. This knowledge transfer activity has enabled teaching staff to develop the skills and knowledge relevant to the new technology which is now informing curriculum development. The North East has been designated the UK’s first Low Carbon Economic Area specialising in ultra-low carbon vehicles. The development is a key priority for the North East and provides opportunities for sustainable employment.
A provider may see themselves as an intrinsic part of a local or regional community. Engaging with those businesses, organisations and professions that will later employ its students is simply good practice. One way of building expertise is to give employers the opportunity to engage directly with the curriculum and influence academic learning for the workplace.

Example: Using industry-based engineers to deliver flexible elements in a university programme

The University of Lincoln recently established a new School of Engineering and set a priority objective to deliver ‘industry ready graduates’. The university works closely with local employers. Collaborating with industry meant that academic staff jointly identified the professional skills required for meeting business needs. They also reviewed the syllabus to determine where industry-based engineers could deliver a teaching and learning opportunity to help develop these skills. The engineers deliver elements of the course at different touch-points ranging from discrete day-long activities to a whole module throughout the academic year. The operation and progress of the ‘touch point’ is monitored primarily through student feedback via a range of mechanisms from focus groups to evaluation questionnaires. A final-year project has been extended from 30 to 45 credits to allow students to deliver useful outputs that have real value to the company and gain credits for this.

Equally, a provider may have a commitment to supporting and developing people in the workforce to improve the local economic and social conditions in the region.

Example: Developing a flexible response for social and economic regeneration

The Wales Legacy Project aimed to address skills shortages across the local community. Swansea Metropolitan University worked closely with Glyndŵr University to build capacity within the region to meet local employers’ needs. This project has involved the piloting of a fast-track, flexible progression pathway at Level 4 in Mathematics and Engineering Science, for experienced people within or potentially within the workforce in the two universities. Each pilot was tailored to meet the needs of local markets and employer needs.

A provider may see this approach as responding to changing market conditions and as part of a drive to ensure efficient and effective use of resources. Engaging with employers to provide learning opportunities may be an alternative to traditional provision because demand for the latter is decreasing. The discipline of housing provides an example of flexible pedagogic approaches as a direct result of declining enrolments on traditional courses. (Many accredited housing courses in English universities, including Salford, Birmingham City, Northumbria and Middlesex, have now been closed because of insufficient demand for places following fee increases.)

Example: Developing flexible professional learning

The Chartered Institute of Housing has itself, as an awarding body, developed a new route to CIH Chartered Membership which aims to recognise knowledge and experience wherever it has been gained. This route is more tailored to individual learners. It recognises the diversity of experience housing professionals bring to the sector and offers a flexible framework for learning which allows housing professionals to provide evidence of the knowledge, skills, understanding and experience they have gathered from a variety of contexts, but particularly at work. It is a work-based, experiential programme that will be delivered to cohorts, using blended learning techniques, but without a formal curriculum, requiring learning derived through the experience of work (available from: http://www.cih.org/workbasedroute).

For some providers it is the employability agenda that informs their profile and the imperative to make their graduates more employable will be prominent. This agenda is becoming increasingly significant because of
publicly available data which requires evidence of employment outcomes and an institution’s approach to employability developments. Institutional imperatives for employability include clear missions for enhanced engagement with employers embedded in learning, teaching and assessment strategies. Flexible pedagogies in this domain should also build learners’ confidence and enhance student engagement and contribution.

Example: Nottingham Trent University Co-curriculum Award

Nottingham Trent University has one of the best records for graduate employment with 94% of graduates from full-time undergraduate study employed or engaged in further study six months after leaving (HESA survey 2010-11). The university works with employers to contribute to courses and holds discipline-focused career fairs involving employers. They also have a strong co-curriculum university award involving employers and work experiences. The ‘Acceler8 Award’ is made up of three sections: work experience, core and skills sessions and panel interview. Students need to complete 50 logged hours of paid or voluntary work with reflection on how this improves specific skills. A Skills Development profile is developed. Core and key skills sessions cover career management with workshops focused on specific skills such as leadership, networking and team working. After the experience, core and skills sessions are completed, the Skills Development Profile, a CV and Acceler8 Timesheet are submitted followed by a panel interview made up of employers and people from within the University. Feedback is provided to improve performance and on completion students gain the Acceler8 Employability Award (available from: https://www.ntu.ac.uk/careers/employability_award/how_it_works/index.html).

Factors determining the extent of flexible approaches

The extent to which flexible pedagogies for employer engagement can be deployed is variable and individualised. Traditional discipline-based teaching in HE can be quite an autonomous practice but with employer responsive provision the academic function is inextricably linked with and dependent on other parts of the institution, including its IT systems, quality processes and general administration as well as political will. If the infrastructure is in place, if good use of technology is deployed, if systems are robust, then flexibility can be accommodated.

While working in a university is a very singular experience, there is a fundamental shift in the notion of what a university is in the 21st century. Knowledge is now everywhere and accessible to everyone who seeks it. These concerns challenge notions of what a university is and what it is for. The extent of how much flexibility is accommodated by an institution may be influenced by the extent to which the provider recognises and utilises the means available to innovate, create and contribute to the knowledge at many different levels. Here the way the student can also contribute through work-based or work-related learning may be relevant. Collis and Moonen (2011) suggest that learning situations should be designed for flexibility and adaptability and should involve opportunities to participate in and contribute to a learning community. Students should be encouraged to contribute learning from their own experiences (for example from the workplace) or through experiential learning situations (such as work-related projects). Encouraging reflective learning and utilising Web 2 technologies such as blogs, wikis and web-based platforms is the pedagogical focus.

A crucial requirement for challenging institutional structures and developing flexible pedagogies is that all HE staff appointed to work in these areas need support and development to understand the issues from both the employer and the HE perspectives. They also need the confidence, understandings and opportunities to develop practices to make any such learning effective. Academics and support services staff need a broad appreciation of what methods are available and which will scaffold or harness the most appropriate learning for each outcome or engagement. The different pedagogies associated with this approach are only likely to be effective and flexible if the right personnel are engaged to deploy them.
A truly flexible pedagogy for employer engagement will teach people how to learn rather than how to understand a particular discipline, if the ultimate aim is to ensure that what is learned theoretically in one context is applied effectively in another and that learners are facilitated to develop their own methods of doing this (OECD 2012; Lucas et al 2012). The extent to which this will happen will depend on the extent to which teachers in HE are supported and facilitated to understand the context. “Educators need to grapple with these trends and engage in professional development activities that promote among them a renewed sense of accountability, innovation, and connection to the organisation’s mission and goals while also promoting professional and personal growth.” (Brancato 2003, p.60.)

Example: Supporting staff development

The Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Development: Work-based Learning in Higher Education at the University of Derby is specifically designed for academics who engage with the development and delivery of work-based learning activities. As well as enhancing knowledge and understanding of the pedagogical approaches available, this provision also gives participants direct, personal understanding of what it means to be an employee learner. The university also offers a work-based learning practitioners programme for people who support, deliver and assess learning in the workplace (available from: http://www.derby.ac.uk/work-based-learning-for-higher-education-postgraduate-certificate-in-professional-development).
Summary

The questions posed earlier in this paper asked if flexible pedagogy for employer engagement was about facilitating flexible access to lifelong learning, in whatever form it may take, for whoever wants or demands it, or if it was a set of learning options constructed to build a flexible and customised system addressing the learning needs of the existing and potential workforce. This report has highlighted a number of relevant issues in response to these questions.

Flexible pedagogic approaches offer a range of tools and techniques for more effective employer engagement and as such provide learning options for addressing employer/employee needs and the employability of graduates. The examples provided in this report suggest there is a ‘toolkit’ or ‘basket’ of pedagogic approaches that, if selected appropriately, can be used to flex and enhance learning opportunities in this context. Some can facilitate access and progression routes for employees to lifelong learning via systems for credit transfer, experiential learning and accrediting and recognising prior learning and experience of the learners. Others offer a variety of techniques and methods to provide a more employer- and/or student-centred approach with the emphasis on work-based learning. The approaches selected can be developed at university, faculty or course level, within a curriculum or through individual learning. Flexibility can be off-campus, online, distant, blended or on-campus and can be offered in ways that are not time bound or prestructured. Pedagogies can be instructional, participatory, collaborative or contributory. This depends on the extent of flexibility the stakeholders agree to and/or respond to.

The evidence suggests that many examples of flexible approaches to learning and teaching occur without the label of ‘flexibility’. Sometimes they are simply a response, often a market response, to meeting an employer’s needs. Sometimes the flexibility is merely related to delivery patterns and can suit both employer and HE provider in utilising services and technologies in a more effective and efficient manner. Flexibility in instructional approaches, systems and processes is not always desired or required.

The evidence also shows there is no one pedagogic approach that is exclusive to employer engagement. Flexible pedagogies for employer engagement are often driven by an institution’s learning and teaching strategy and the implementation and utilisation of resources and teaching methods is championed at faculty, discipline and course level. The flexible approaches identified as being appropriate for a very diverse constituency of students (employees as learners or learners requiring work experiences) can be used to demonstrate opportunities for encouraging greater flexibility and autonomy for all students.

Some methods and approaches appear to be more effective than others and the theme running throughout the examples is the implicit assumption that reflective practice is a beneficial approach. For work-based learners the opportunities to enhance their learning from the workplace through individual learning contracts, action research and working through problem-based learning appear to be relevant and stretching. For students undertaking work-related learning work experience, in its many forms, works best with guidance through directed personal inquiry and real-world projects. Class-based work simulation, problem-solving group work and direct access to employers through employer delivery in the curriculum, for example, and employer mentoring schemes are beneficial substitutions for direct work experience. There are more opportunities for giving the workplace as a site for learning a more prominent position in a programme. The Appendix below outlines a toolkit with other suggested approaches that can be selected to suit the context.

There are compelling policy and business imperatives supporting the endeavour to respond to employer/employee demands but organisational cultures and structures impact on the extent to which flexible pedagogies may be deployed. How much customised or tailored learning provision is possible will be informed by the direction of the mission and the internally-driven need for efficiency as much as ensuring all students as customers/consumers receive similar quality experiences. Sometimes marketisation may suggest that a more open and bespoke response to employers is required but increased centralisation of systems and processes
may contradict the production of personalised or customised provision. For example centralised admissions services and prescribed costing models may diminish the opportunity for personal engagement with potential learners by academics, and the exploration of bespoke and individualised course provision.

To conclude, some providers have embraced this line of business wholeheartedly, for others it is either not on the agenda or the approach may be bespoke and limited. The evidence here indicates that for some HE providers, flexible approaches may be developed that support access to lifelong learning. Equally a range of learning options applicable to the real world, addressing the learning needs of the existing and potential workforce may predominate. What is relevant is the extent to which an institution recognises the roles and needs of the different stakeholders involved in the development process. The defining characteristic of flexible pedagogies for employer engagement is that it is a three-way construct, involving learners, HE providers and employers. Flexibility for all three actors is desirable, but to meet all interests equally in the same pedagogical situation is challenging. It requires an open approach to communication that invites the perspectives of each of the players and recognises both compromise and limitations.

A thorough exploration of flexible pedagogy for employer engagement opens up the opportunity to think beyond systems and processes and enables a discussion about teaching and learning. The focus to date has been primarily on frameworks and alliances driven largely by quantifiable targets rather than a qualitative reflection of learning experiences in different contexts. There is an increasing demand for more flexibility and this report has highlighted a way of approaching employer engagement activity in a different way, through an examination of the nature of the teaching and learning. However, flexible pedagogies for employer engagement can only happen when policies, business models and procedures allow for it. This contextual framework informs the way in which they are deployed and promoted.

It is the combination of the HE mission, the supporting structures and the dispositions of the teachers to select the most appropriate tools, which bring together the components of a truly flexible pedagogy. Such pedagogy would provide flexible access to a stimulating and engaging learning experience that invites students to learn how to learn, to contribute, evaluate and reflect on their learning, to understand the complexity of their discipline/subject and its application in the workplace. It would enable learners to study at a pace and in a place they prefer, accessing supportive and facilitative staff and resources. This would foster the acquisition of attributes and capabilities to benefit individuals and their current and future employing organisations equally. It would support the development of new knowledge in partnership with the HE providers.
Recommendations

Considerable resources have been directed towards the employer engagement agenda and it is currently the work-related learning aspect, addressing employer demands for skills and attributes for the future workforce that is receiving particular attention. There is little evidence however, that evidence-informed pedagogical debates have been at the forefront of enquiry about activity, although there is a growing community of practice among teachers. The pedagogies deployed for work-based learning have been well-articulated but the effectiveness of approaches requires more evaluation. It is recommended that:

- the academic community continues to identify and evaluate evidence-informed pedagogic approaches to both work-related and work-based learning;
- institutional strategies for learning and teaching, including the use of ICT systems and web 2.0 technologies, are reviewed to assess the connections between these and the way teaching staff utilise and develop flexible pedagogies in the context of employer engagement;
- examples of whole institutional approaches to employer engagement should be identified and explored within the context of the continuum outlined here to further the discussion around flexible pedagogies;
- evidence of student engagement with the development and delivery of flexible learning approaches for both work-based learning and work-related learning should be evaluated.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Michael Grove, Director of the National HE STEM Programme for allowing the use of examples, and to Judy Smith (Jay Consulting), Celia Moran (University of Bradford), Tracey White (Lincoln University), Daniela Hawryliuk (Sheffield Hallam University) and Judy Rumbelow (Bibby Rumbelow Ltd.) for their comments and observations.
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IfM/IBM (2008) *Succeeding through service innovation: A service perspective for education, research, business and government*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Institute for Manufacturing (IfM) and International Business Machines Corporation (IBM).


Lemanski, T., Mewis, R. and Overton, T. (2011) *An Introduction to Work-Based Learning*. UK Physical Sciences Centre: A Physical Sciences Practice Guide, HEA. Really sorry can you clarify the place of publication and publisher?


Annex: A toolkit for assessing flexible pedagogies for employer engagement

This Annex provides guidance to support the development of a flexible pedagogic approach for employer engagement. It can be used to develop responsive provision for employees or to address employability skills in undergraduate and postgraduates.

The toolkit has three parts. First there are general prompt questions to consider as part of an initial review of flexible approaches for employer engagement. The second part focuses on addressing the context and organisational ambitions for flexible approaches to employer engagement. The last provides a checklist of tools and resources for developing flexible pedagogies.
Part One: The context

In the paper earlier it was suggested that employer engagement is not a single act that produces one outcome for an HE provider. Rather employer engagement can be considered as a continuum of inter-related elements that make up a strategy for engaging employers for a range of purposes. When engaging employers, the initial stage is to reflect on the purpose and ambitions of the engagement and the propositions within these. The overarching questions to ask may include the following:

- what is the development you are considering?
- who is involved?
- how does it fit into the institutional mission?
- what drivers does this approach respond to?
- what is your institutional business model in this context?
- what do you think will inform the approach you can take?
- what aspects and extent of flexibility will your institution support?
- how do internal strategies and systems support flexibility?
- how will this activity align with internal systems?
- how, if at all, is this approach different from other aspects of your learning provision?
- who will you engage internally in the development of your approach and how will you do this?
Part Two: The framework for flexibility

This section provides guidance for considering the institutional framework required for employer engagement. Here the aim is to review the mission and structures available to enhance the flexibility of the offer. It is proposed that to develop flexible pedagogies, policy and structural considerations need to be addressed. Table 1 provides some questions to review these.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: The institutional framework</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dimension within which to assess flexible pedagogy</td>
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| **Mission** | • Does the institutional mission support this type of activity?  
• Is there room for it in the current landscape?  
• How does it align with the learning and teaching strategy?  
• Is there sufficient flexibility built into the mission?  
• Is this activity integrated into workforce development? |
| **Building employer alliances** | • What is the extent of discussion and dialogue with employers either individually or collectively?  
• How is the relationship developed incrementally to facilitate a two-way understanding and knowledge of different organisational cultures?  
• What is the approach to supporting the development of employers’ knowledge and understanding of higher education?  
• What staff or teams are involved in developing this agenda? What communication methods are deployed to enhance cross-institutional approaches? |
| **Delivery and logistics** | • Are there accelerated procedures for approval of employer responsive provision?  
• How are the proposed regulations and awards aligned to the quality infrastructure?  
• Is flexibility built in?  
• Are there flexible registration periods?  
• What is the nature of advanced standing agreements?  
• What is the policy on accreditation of employer training, the recognition of professional memberships?  
• How supportive is the ICT infrastructure including VLE, including for off-campus learning?  
• What are the arrangements for accessing e-books, open resources, use of social media and Skype, companion websites from publishers?  
• What should learners know about flexibility? |
Part Three: Developing flexible pedagogies

If the systems and structures appear to be supportive and sufficiently flexible, then the pedagogic approach can be considered and selected. There are a range of pedagogic tools and techniques that can be deployed to support this agenda. Staff involved in curriculum developments, assessments and student engagements will apply different approaches in different contexts. For work-related learning, the discipline context may be relevant, for work-based learning the workplace may be at the centre and influence the choice of tools deployed.

The following questions may help in choosing flexible pedagogies:

- who will deliver the learning and how will they be supported?
- what kinds of learning approaches and tools will you use and why?
- how important is flexibility for learners?
- how important is flexibility for employers?
- what evidence are you drawing on to know what employers and learners want in terms of flexibility?
- what are the restraints on your approach?
- how influential is the pace and the place on the methods chosen?
- what makes it a flexible approach?
Table 2 identifies tools and techniques that can support the development of flexible pedagogies. The lists are not exhaustive and merely provide options for practitioners who can choose to undertake more flexible approaches in their teaching. Many of these tools may already be in place but here the emphasis is on engaging and being responsive to employers. The outcome may be to support employees who are work-based to achieve learning that will enhance their employability or professional knowledge and capability or to develop work-related learning for a full-time learner to improve their employability. Such activity may be undertaken as part of the curriculum or as an adjunct to it.

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<tr>
<th>Dimension within which to assess flexible pedagogy</th>
<th>Tools and techniques</th>
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<tr>
<td>Staff development</td>
<td>Are there learning and development opportunities for staff deployed to employer engagement projects?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Curriculum development and content</td>
<td>What is going to be in the framework for providing courses and curriculum content that is employer responsive? Choose as many as appropriate.</td>
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<td>• APEL use</td>
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<td>• Bespoke courses including FDs</td>
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<td>• Bite-size, small awards</td>
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<td>• Co-curricular/extra-curricular activities</td>
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<td>• Curriculum determined by learner</td>
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<td>• Employer designed assessments</td>
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<td>• Employer input into curriculum design</td>
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<td>• Employer leads curriculum design</td>
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<td>• Generic learning outcomes</td>
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<td>• Learning contracts forms basis of engagement with student</td>
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<td>• Shell framework</td>
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<td>• Work-based assessments</td>
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<td>• Work-related modules/embedded activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning and teaching approaches</td>
<td>What teaching approaches best suit the situation?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Action research</td>
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<td>• Credit-bearing placement</td>
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<td>• Cross-disciplinary teaching</td>
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<td>• Employer assessment</td>
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<td>• Experiential learning</td>
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<td>• Group tasks</td>
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<td>• Internships, simulations</td>
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<td>• Mentoring</td>
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<td>• Personal inquiry</td>
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<td>• Practitioner research</td>
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<td>• Problem-based learning</td>
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<td>• Role play</td>
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<td>• Real-world projects</td>
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<td>• Short placements</td>
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<td>• Sandwich placement</td>
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<td>• Second life</td>
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<td>• Team work</td>
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<td>• Work experiences</td>
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