

**CWLLN Research Project**  
**'The Employer Voice'**

**A qualitative study of employer views of Higher Education  
in Coventry and Warwickshire**

**February 2010**

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## **Project Overview**

This project aims to support CWLLN's work in improving employer engagement with Higher Education in Coventry and Warwickshire. There is a considerable interest in this area which is at the forefront of the government's high level skills strategy to raise the skills and capacity for innovation of those in the workforce. Employer demand for work based learning is high on the research agenda with a number of key reports recently published at national and local level. However, the majority of research undertaken in this field adopts a quantitative approach, and it can be seen that the 'employer voice', particularly in relation to SMEs, is underrepresented in the overall debate. Furthermore, there may be a need for research which has a more localised focus for education providers in Coventry and Warwickshire, which can be of practical use in engaging and marketing to local employers and meeting their needs.

In addition, research findings are generally reported to a target audience of policy makers and educationalists – with consequences for the style and language in which they are presented. This research project aims to explore the findings of quantitative studies of employer engagement with Higher Education through qualitative research with employers in Coventry and Warwickshire: our aim is to find the employer voice and present it in an accessible and engaging way.

## **This Report**

The summary conclusions of the research are presented at the start of the report after sections on research objectives, methodology, a short overview of past research and sampling. The findings of the research are then presented within their themes. The report concludes with a section of recommendations.

## **Research objectives**

Essentially, the objectives of the research are to identify issues which impact on employer engagement with learning providers offering higher level provision in Coventry and Warwickshire by:

- Exploring employers' perceptions of the above learning providers
- Assessing employer awareness of the local Higher Education offer and employer engagement schemes
- Exploring the perceived benefits and non-benefits of Higher Education amongst employers
- Exploring employers' response to previous experience of engaging with HE providers

- Seeking employers' viewpoints on the role of skills development in increasing economic prosperity
- Identifying employer preferences in marketing approaches from local education providers

## **Methodology**

The research was carried out via depth face-to-face and telephone interviews. Fieldwork took place between October 2009 and January 2010.

## **Past research**

There is a considerable body of research which has been carried out in relation to employers and the Higher Education Sector. It is outside the remit of this project to present a detailed review of the work in this field. However, we have identified that the findings of much past research in this field do not differentiate between employers within different industry sectors whom we know have different needs, attitudes and requirements - employers are not homogeneous even within individual sectors.

In addition, much of the research that has been carried out into employer views of Higher Education contains few direct quotes from respondents. The views of employers are often reported through the prism of the researcher and they themselves are not often given a platform. This can result in a certain detachment and make it difficult for the reader to engage with the issues. One of the aims of this report is to present the authentic employer voice – or rather voices. This research project is relatively small-scale, but the remit of the Coventry and Warwickshire Lifelong Learning Network allows us to explore in detail highly localised views of employers who are of direct relevance to its partner learning providers.

The short-term nature of the project allows us to capture a snapshot of employer viewpoints following a critical time of economic downturn in the local region.

## **Sampling**

Who do we mean by the employer? Are they an individual or an organisation? In this study, we have sampled organisations which have a requirement for employees who are qualified to higher level, and have identified as their 'employer voice' respondents with some authority to speak about skills issues: directors, training managers, and human resource managers. It is important to take into

account that our 'employer voices' are presenting their own individual viewpoints which may not, of course, be representative of their entire organisation. However, we are confident of the validity of their contribution in relation to their roles and experience.

10 interviews were carried out with employers from each of the following CWLLN industry sectors:

- Engineering
- Construction
- Cultural and Creative
- Health, Social Care and Early Years

Sampling of employers was carried out in order to include a range of employers in relation to size of business, location within Coventry and Warwickshire, and previous levels of engagement with Higher Education providers. Organisation size ranged from 5 employees to 500 at local level. The majority of our respondents are classed as Small to Medium Sized enterprises. Recruitment was conducted through employer contacts with the Coventry and Warwickshire Lifelong Learning Network and its partner learning providers and through direct approaches to businesses in the local area.

## **Summary conclusions**

### **Recognising employer diversity**

- There are key differences between our four subject sector industries, however:  
Employers are not homogenous – past research and analysis often treats them as a common group. We should perhaps talk about 'Employer Voices' as opposed to the 'Employer Voice'  
Even within sectors, there are differences relating to types of services provided which influences take-up of, and attitudes towards, Higher Education

## **Statutory requirements for higher level qualifications**

- Statutory requirements for qualifications and clear guidance in relation to them have significant impact: for example, there is a contrast between Early Years and Adult Care sectors. Similarly, membership of some professional bodies, e.g. IMECHE require higher level qualifications

## **Learning provider communication with local employers**

- Employers would like to be kept better informed of local curriculum offer in their sectors
- Communication with local education providers is seen as inadequate by a number of employers; SMEs perceive themselves to be of lesser interest than larger companies
- Employers with 100-200 staff do not seem to be a target for education providers, although they are a key target for government policy
- A number of employers stated that they were not approached for student placements by local providers and so took on students from outside the region
- A number of respondents commented unfavourably on the use of 'academic' language and jargon by learning provider representatives and on websites
- Generally an initial email is seen as the best approach, however...  
Employers recognise that they are extremely difficult to make contact with

## **Developing employer relationships with HE Learning Providers**

- A number of employers report very good relationships with their local learning provider which have been developed over time
- However, effective partnerships can be based on individual relationships which are not sustained when those individuals move on

## **Relevance of curriculum offer**

- There is a reported mismatch between employer and provider needs (for example in Adult Social Care) where curriculum delivery may be seen as out of date with current industry agenda
- This mismatch can lead to gaps in provision – employers don't send students so courses close despite an underlying requirement
- In addition, a number of employers state that Higher Education equips learners with a broad range of general skills, rather than the specialist expertise which they require. This is particularly significant for smaller companies, typical of Creative and Cultural Industries, who need an immediate return from new employees and from investment in training
- Employers have an interest in distance learning and many have a preference for flexible attendance and curricula

## **Employers as partners in education**

- Museums and theatres have more in common with education providers themselves than employer organisations. They see themselves as partners in education rather than users of the service
- Academic language is a barrier – employers struggle to decipher the actual content of some courses

## **Impact of the economic downturn**

- The economic downturn has hit the Engineering and Construction sectors hard. Attitudes vary:

- Some employers see skills development as a priority and feel it is something that they can offer their staff instead of bonuses
- Some see it as the only way to recovery
- Others cannot sustain training and see survival as their only objective

## **Funding**

- Access to funding for training is widely seen as complex, confusing and unfair
- Sometimes learning providers are regarded with suspicion, particularly in relation to information given about funding
- Private providers are sometimes seen as more cost-effective, flexible and relevant

## **Conflicts in interest**

- There is a perceived conflict in business interests between employers and education providers:
  - employers want highly skilled workers but feel that learning providers give too much support to avoid non-achievement in students, and therefore lower standards
  - In addition, employers are aware that learning providers have recruitment targets which they have to reach, and feel that quantity is sometimes achieved at the expense of quality

## **Findings**

The findings of the research are presented below within their themes.

## **Familiarity with Higher Education**

The great majority of respondents have a relatively high level of familiarity with Higher Education and the range of qualifications within it, in contrast to the findings of other research carried out in this field. This is perhaps unsurprising in view of the fact that our respondents were selected on the basis of having a requirement for higher levels skills within their organisation, and all employ graduates. Indeed, all of our respondents had undertaken a higher level qualification at some point. Some respondents however required clarification between the different qualifications at Level 3 and Level 4 and there was some confusion around the introduction of the new diplomas:

*That's the big minefield. I don't even understand all the school qualifications.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

Overall, there is a very high awareness of the fact that both the local Universities and Further Education Colleges offer courses at Higher level.

## **Existing employer relationships with HE Learning Providers**

Current involvement with HE learning providers varies significantly between sectors and individual employers within sectors.

A number of companies have a very strong ethos of supporting and promoting education and learning, not only within their company, but also within their wider industry. This ethos is demonstrated by their support for formal or informal learning within their organisation; formalised relationships with learning providers (local and national); and provision of placements to local students. Encouragingly, there are very positive examples of relationships between employers and local HE providers from the University, FE College and private training provider sectors. Some of our employers have directly contributed to curriculum design through formal mechanisms; others report longstanding relationships with members of staff at their local colleges and Universities.

Existing relationships between employers and HE learning providers involve a range of activities:

- Employee training
- Employer contribution to curriculum design

- Knowledge based transfer schemes
- Provision of student placements
- Student visits
- Employer talks to students
- Attendance at learning provider events for employers

## **Developing employer relationships with HE Learning Providers**

Frequently, these relationships are built up over a number of years, based on the efforts and activities of learning provider staff and individuals within employer organisations who have a keen interest in, and commitment to, education:

*My co-director here is a part of the advisory board at the university and has had links there for many years. Also through working with the school by offering lectures and extra- curricular activity or even getting involved in exams, our practice has grown with the [University]School and developed a relationship with them and we are known to the staff and vice versa. By taking on the graduates and the year- out students, when they go back they tell the tutors of their experience and give feedback.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

*One of the senior men is very interested in education and takes it upon himself to look into it.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

Employers may also welcome the opportunity to contribute to course design as recognition of their expertise and credibility within their industry:

*They invited me, I was extremely flattered, to sit on their industry advisory board which I accepted with alacrity, so that relationship will build.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

The importance of commitment to the employer/learning provider relationship from senior managers on both sides is emphasised by respondents from all sectors:

*Without [our Directors'] active support, we wouldn't do half of what we do with education, it matters hugely that they are so keen, so enthusiastic about it. Without that backing from top management you won't be allowed to do it. It's all time out of our working day...It's often the case that particularly the course leader is very keen to work with industry but maybe his Vice-Chancellor isn't because he can't see a good reason for it.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

However, there is a risk that the relationships can founder when individuals move on

*It tends to be an individual who is passionate who drives it, so here I can immediately think of two people and it's just their thing; they really, really want to improve education, games education so they will drive it at any company they are at if allowed to, but it's a huge risk because when they leave...all of the courses they have been working with are down that input.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

*A previous managing director was sort of appointed to go into the University and develop contacts, but those contacts fell away and we lost them.*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]

It is evident that a good relationship with a learning provider relies on a number of factors: a rapport between individuals, employer commitment, learning provider responsiveness and, perhaps most importantly, curriculum fit are central. Opinions of individual learning providers and even courses can vary widely in a direct reflection of their relevance to the skills requirements of the individual employer. Curriculum fit can be seen to be achieved more easily where employers have more general higher level skills requirements within a subject area or where the course of study is highly specific to a particular role, e.g. architect or Early Years practitioner. (See 'relevance of curriculum offer' below).

A number of respondents have been approached by learning providers to support student activities such as employer visits and presentations. Where possible, employers appear keen to support local learners, despite the limitations of time and resources:

*We would run a day where bus loads of students would come down and see the processes and someone would give a lecture. We have staff that go out regularly and give lectures.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

Where requests for employer input to student activities were met, the importance of having a reasonable- sized and responsive audience was emphasised:

*You need people who are interested...one of our directors gave a presentation to a group of students and at the end not one of them asked a single question.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

*We were invited to a University to give a talk on working in our industry and three people turned up.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

### **Selecting a local HE learning provider**

Overall, employers prefer to work with local learning providers for ease of access.

However, employers will develop relationships nationally where a course curriculum delivers the particular skills and specialism they require:

In addition to the curriculum, (See 'relevance of curriculum offer' below) cost is also a key issue for employers, particular in a period of economic downturn. The time taken to complete a course is also an important factor, along with the effectiveness of support provided to learners:

*One is cost...especially at the minute; the second is time, when do they run the courses how long is it going to take. Then I look at support functions for the students. If they are getting stuck who do they see for help? Then looking closely at the course content and seeing how that matches what we do here, that is where as an employer we have our biggest problem because it doesn't fit.*

[Employer, Health, Early Years and Adult Social Care]

Some employers leave the choice of learning provider to their employee, in response to their individual requirements and learning styles:

*One [employee studying at higher level] is Open University because she can do it as and when she can... I have another person doing one at the local college; she only has to leave the nursery one afternoon every week. Another member of staff has decided to take a different route and she is doing*

*an HND and taking a couple of days every week out of the nursery and going to college, she wanted to do her learning face to face rather than doing it on her own and that suits her.*

[Employer, Health, Early Years and Adult Social Care]

### **Specialist private training providers**

A number of our employers use industry-specific private training providers who can provide specialist skills:

*Because they [private training providers] are maybe bespoke to a type of industry they have more of what you want.*

[Employer, Health, Early Years and Adult Social Care]

*Quite a lot of our staff already have degrees and it's quite a specialist provision; if it's training they need it tends to be really specific, not something they get from a higher education institute.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

*Once they have started as graduates, it's industry specific training we have to provide.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

Such training is often provided by the manufacturers of specialist equipment.

In the Health and Social Care sector, private training providers may be seen as more cost-effective:

*In terms of cost they are incomparable really. If the colleges have funding they are alright, if they haven't got funding they can't cut back and the private providers prove to be a lot more cost effective. We have often used private providers because they are the cheapest.*

[Employer, Health, Early Years and Adult Social Care]

And responsive to employer needs:

*I think they are more flexible in terms of delivery times; this is a major issue. Very often the colleges have their specific attendance times whereas the private providers are more based on a one to one basis. We like to have the courses bespoke to our needs; we have much more input into the content.*

[Employer, Health, Early Years and Adult Social Care]

### **Relevance of curriculum offer**

The provision of a relevant curriculum offer to SMEs is pivotal but presents a particular challenge for learning providers in view of their frequently specialist requirements:

*Because we are quite a specific company, a lot of the courses even on apprenticeships they are quite general. They are electrical or electronics courses, we don't want either- we want something in between. For example we had one lad who was doing an apprenticeship and we didn't send him on his second year as we felt it wasn't relevant to [name of company]. That was a free course so we spent some money to send him on other courses that weren't supplied by the colleges.*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]

*Because a lot of training courses you go on maybe 90% of what you learn isn't relevant to the company, we are just giving them a broader knowledge. It's not too bad when all you are doing is giving them time off; it's different when you have to pay £1000 for someone to do a HNC.*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]

Some respondents feel that the HE curriculum does not place enough emphasis on developing the application of subject knowledge within the workplace, particularly where full-time students do not have a work-based component:

*Sometimes the curriculum content lacks in real world modules, the modules that could deal with people, with cost and the way the society works as a whole, the courses are very subject based and I think would benefit from a bit of variety; as a result they are not ready to hit work from day one. They need to learn a lot more before they are effective.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

As we have seen, curriculum content and its relevance to industry requirements is a key consideration for employers in all sectors. However, it can be seen to be a major issue for the Creative industries in particular.

Firstly, a number of our respondents working in Creative Media companies and the Computer Games industry question the need for higher qualifications, citing the importance of industry experience and portfolios of work:

*I think we all prefer experience rather than a bit of paper. I wouldn't say that's a product of great strategic thinking, that's just the culture.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

*In the media production industry you don't have to go through the Higher Education path because it's about what you can do, not what piece of paper you have*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

However, in practice it appears that the majority of employees enter these highly competitive industries with Degree level qualifications:

*It is extremely difficult, in essence we don't care what qualifications you have - we care that you can do what we need you to do. On the Arts side, it is perfectly possible for someone to turn up here with a swimming certificate and a brownie badge and a blinding portfolio and a good attitude and we will take them but in reality it is extraordinarily difficult to get yourself up to the level we require without a Computer Science or a Games Development degree.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

It is, however, noticeable that these newer industry sectors are employing graduates from 'traditional' Higher Education courses such as Fine Art, Maths, Physics, and Computer Science in favour of the plethora of games-related courses on offer at higher level.

There is real concern raised by employers in the sector that current courses in the area of film production and games design are not delivering required skills and are raising false expectations:

*The Unis and the employers seem to be at loggerheads because the computer art type courses are very broad but a job a graduate would be doing is very specific, with specific skills. The course is very broad but the requirement is very narrow. A lot of the games courses are geared towards making computer game designers or producers, which is a very advanced role that you would get after 15 years of working in lots of departments doing lots of different things. Nobody comes out of Uni and*

*goes straight into that role, it does not happen, which is problematic for the students because they are setting targets to go straight into that role.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

Some employers question the sheer number of courses offered in Creative Media subject areas which are popular with prospective students, such as Games:

*There are over 300 game related courses and I would like to see fewer of them but with more quality.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

*I forget the exact statistic but 3 years ago they said there was going to be more graduates coming out of Games courses than the total number of people employed in the Games industry.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

There are, however, examples of good practice offered in relation to Games courses and the importance of accreditation by Skillset, the Sector Skills Council for Creative Media is widely cited:

*The big companies will only go to the Unis with the Skillset courses.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

*We are going to work more and more with Skillset accredited courses -there aren't many, or that are looking for Skillset accreditation. This is to be sure that they are teaching the skills that we need.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

Skillset has a high level of credibility in a sector with a broadly ambivalent view of the education sector.

A number of the Creative Media employer respondents who have concerns about the content and quality of Higher Education courses in their sector are making considerable efforts to work with the education sector and individual learning providers in order to raise the standards of skills development across their sector (see section: *Employers as partners in education*, below)

Having entered the Creative Media industry, it appears highly unusual for employees to undertake further, formal qualifications.

*If they needed or wanted more work and have done more than 3 years in the industry, nobody cares about your qualifications; they want to see your portfolio. That is what will get you your next job. it's still your portfolio that gets you in the door.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

However, in a fast-moving industry, skills development is of key importance and internal training is consistently taking place. Larger companies are more likely to carry out structured, in-house staff development activities:

*It is a way for our talented and skilled developers to teach each other..., someone will write a module and this can be informal, it can be a lecture, depending on how the person wants to deliver it, we have been doing it for 5 years. It is a formal thing within now. Most developers I have met are information junkies, they want to learn. It's also good for the people teaching because it is cool to say, I know how to do this, let me show you, it's a win/win thing.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

In smaller companies, staff skills development is equally important, but appears to be more ad hoc:

*I think it's actually hands -on training so it's not specifically sit down for an hour, it's more a fact of the equipment we have and who is knowledgeable in that area. One of the lads who's around will say, " This is how it's done, you have a go". It's nearly round the clock, on the job training.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

The research offers a highly topical example of how the political agenda driving social change can have a significant impact on the training needs of employees and subsequently the content of the curriculum and its delivery by learning providers: in the Social Care sector, the personalisation agenda requires the Higher Education sector to be responsive to this major culture change within the sector. The effectiveness with which learning providers have met this need is the subject of some concern from the Social Care sector and has highlighted some of the issues facing employers and educators:

It is recognised that the curriculum is not set by the University, but interpretation of that curriculum, the knowledge and recent professional experience of education providers is brought into question by some employers from the Adult Social Care sector:

*When we pulled together a group of training providers their understanding of personalisation wasn't evident. If that is a key government driver now and the local education providers don't understand it, then what are they delivering? So it is a major concern for us because they're still following down the route, "if this is what the National Occupational Standards say, that's what we do" - the 'hows' make a significant difference and I think there is a mismatch. I don't know about their time, resources and capacity. It may be that they're not based in practice, but to not even understand the key drivers that are coming down through government is a poor excuse, they should be keeping up with their own CPD.*

[Employer, Health, Early Years and Adult Social Care]

Where course curricula do not meet the needs of employers there is a risk that they will simply close due to lack of enrolments, leaving a gap in a needed area of provision:

*Universities are in a market situation: courses they offer have to be commercially viable. However, it should be the employers' needs that are driving the courses, so there needs to be a match between the two.*

[Employer, Health, Early Years and Adult Social Care]

### **Higher Education for maintaining standards and improving business performance**

It should be noted that the higher level curriculum offer and skills development provided by education providers plays a key role in maintaining professional standards and business performance across local industry sectors:

*They get into our place and learn the work bit and what the reality is, but it's good that they get their grounding in colleges.*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]

*I think there is just under 50 staff and I imagine 50% are doing higher level qualifications. I think they are vital, the knowledge and what they put back into our business is fantastic so gaining that theory*

*behind the practical is vital and very worthwhile. I have supported them as they have brought new ideas into the company which has helped us improve our performance.*

[Employer, Health, Early Years and Adult Social Care]

In many cases, Higher Education is not only desirable, but essential:

*The University is very important to us for providing our required level of training. .. through them we can rely on the course being up to a relevant standard. If it didn't meet the minimum criteria for them then it wouldn't be good enough for us. Ultimately we need an accredited course for their professional development.*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]

### **Employers as partners in education**

As we have seen above, a number of our employers have a strong commitment to learning both within their organisations and across their wider sector. In particular, museums, galleries and theatres can be seen to have much in common with learning providers, seeing themselves very much as partners in education, with a number in the performing arts sector supporting the delivery of qualifications through local learning providers.

For many employers, their work with learning providers is in the future interests of their workforce:

*The more input from the industry into courses, the better the graduates will be.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

*We want to be developing the workforce of the future. They will go on and work with other organisations across the country and they will take their knowledge of us with them.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

All of our respondents in museums, galleries and performing arts organisations have a highly skilled and qualified team, many of whom are experts in their field:

*That is the standard requirement to work in a professional museum. Anybody who is behind the scenes and considered a museum professional. In terms of my team the qualification is a Degree, and*

*it is quite normal to have a post-grad qualification as well, I have a couple in my team. That is fairly normal; most museum professionals have a degree, that is why the pay is so low!*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

Where further, higher qualifications are undertaken by museum and gallery employees, they are generally accredited by a specialist industry body, such as the Museums Association which offers its industry professional development programme: the Associateship of the Museums Association.

Organisations within the theatre, museums and gallery sector all have dedicated education teams which work with schools, families and (possibly to a lesser extent) Higher Education institutions:

*We have done a lot at FE but not HE so far.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

Overall, employers in the museum, gallery and performing arts sector express a desire to develop further their work with Higher Education providers and a number are actively building highly positive relationships with them.

*Our director feels it is absolutely key that because we are in the heart of the city and so is the uni, we should be working together and keeping students who have been learning here -giving them the opportunity to work with us.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

### **Higher level skills: the 'buy in' or 'grow your own' equation**

A significant number of employers in the Construction and Engineering sectors seem to be facing a dilemma in terms of whether to recruit graduates or less-qualified employees whom they can support to develop higher level qualifications. This respondent recalls facing this decision when replacing a member of his team:

*We thought "do we replace her with another person of a similar age who knows nothing about the industry and train them from scratch, or do we take an 'A' Level student with a good basic education and train them up?" We have decided where possible to hire younger people who are quite bright*

*and train them up. You increase the salaries as they learn and that is an incentive to them. We reward them as they improve.*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]

A number of respondents report 'growing their own' highly qualified staff in response to a perceived deficit in graduate work readiness:

*Highly skilled yes, they have degrees and post degree qualifications but that doesn't always mean that they are ready for employment. For example the correlations that people make are "do I take a 21 year old out of uni or do I take a 16 year old with 5 year's experience, they would be in competition with each other. Although one is classed as 'highly skilled' the other has the experience for the relevant skills and is ready to work.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

Some respondents attribute this reported lack of graduate 'work-readiness' to limitations in the HE curriculum offer (see 'relevance of curriculum offer' below).

Graduates may be feeling the impact of the need for employers to obtain an immediate return on their recruitment investment which is particularly pressing during a period of economic downturn:

*It is a very big issue in the current climate because everyone needs to hit the ground running.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

This requirement appears to be more critical for smaller sized companies, where the impact of each employee's performance may be greater than within a large organisation.

Some employers report that the relative cheapness of employing a new graduate does not always compensate for their lack of experience:

*I took on from the cheaper end and I'm not sure if that's a good idea actually because it takes them a long time to get up to speed. It takes 18 months before you can call them useful... I'm actually advertising now and asking for at least 3 years experience because I have gone off the idea of having new people from university. I think that was a mistake in the first place.*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]

All Degrees are not seen as equal by our respondents. Pre-'92 were widely recognised as having prestige, but the value of graduates from individual universities relates more closely to their curriculum offer and its 'fit' with the services and skills of each employer (see *current involvement with HE Learning Providers*, below)

*Museums and galleries are least likely to recruit graduates from local universities, preferring employees from institutions specialising in museum studies such as the University of Leicester.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

At times, the demands on new graduates appear rigorous yet at the same time intangible. It is commonly expressed that graduates need somewhat ill-defined qualities such as 'nous' 'something about them', or indeed 'grit'. On further questioning, it would seem that these qualities are gained through work experience, or indeed life experience. Interestingly, employees with a background of vocational learning were viewed positively in this regard by some:

*They have picked themselves up by their bootstraps and what they have is grit.*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]

### **Statutory requirements for higher level qualifications**

There is some statutory requirement for higher level qualifications in all of our sectors (other than Cultural and Creative Industries) to meet the requirements for professional body recognition (e.g. ICE, IMechE); to be qualified for a particular role (e.g. architect, civil engineer, advanced practitioner in childcare); or to meet contract delivery requirements. Statutory requirement for higher level qualifications obviously relates to the nature of business and services offered but, unsurprisingly, has a high level of influence on the relationship between organisation, higher education and learning provider.

*We are obliged to have graduates by contract; with the training we do internally it's to do with our processes and systems.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

*Because we are a consultancy type practice, their qualifications are a sign of their ability to take up certain types of work. A professional qualification will entitle them to sign a report or to give professional advice.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

*The course has to meet certain standards in terms of the Institute of Civil Engineers*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

The Early Years sector stands out as a sector with clear and rigorously observed statutory requirements for workforce employee qualifications. In a risk-averse sector such as Childcare, the importance of higher level training and qualifications can be seen to have a direct impact on the high status of skills development and the highly positive relationships observed between employers and learning providers.

*What you've got in the children's workforce, and coming down through CWDC [Children's Workforce Development Council], is absolute clarity around the shape, framework, and future education to get everyone up to this world class children's workforce by 2012. The funding is there to support it too.*

[Employer, Health, Early Years and Adult Social Care]

Conversely, there is evidence that policy and guidance defined by Department of Health for the Adult Social Care sector is less well defined and funded:

*Delivery of the personalisation agenda is subject to local interpretation.*

[Employer, Health, Early Years and Adult Social Care]

However, it is also evident that changing legislation in relation to employee training requirements makes significant demands on staff time and expertise:

*All the while we are having changes in the legal requirements to input into our training programme and they have huge implications. Part of my role is to look at the legal requirements and stay up to date with changes. I then have to direct my line manager towards those changes and how we can adapt to them.*

[Employer, Health, Early Years and Adult Social Care]

## Funding

Outside of the Early Years sector, access to funding for training is widely seen as complex, confusing and unfair. Most of our respondents were familiar with Train to Gain, but employers from the Engineering and Construction sectors in particular were considerably less familiar with sources of available funding for higher level qualifications.

Many respondents report confusion about the availability of funding for higher level qualifications for their employees and the shortage of consistent, reliable information:

*I find it very confusing, different training providers will give you different information. I find it a minefield to be honest. There doesn't seem to be any correlation between training providers, they tell you different things. Everybody, no matter who you talk to you get a different answer.*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]

There is some frustration regarding the perceived lack of funding for higher level qualifications, with some concern about progression opportunities from funded courses, particularly for employees who have been motivated by a return to learning:

*Where Train to Gain are giving people across the board some kind of personal qualification, it boosts their confidence; it can only be a good thing. They are providing a ladder for people who previously thought it was just a job they were doing and they could go no further.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

*We have had that Train to Gain thing, but every time we look at it there isn't funding for what we want. They are looking at Level 2 whereas our guys are much higher.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

*There is very little. Up to Level 2/NVQ level 3 there is, but beyond that no. Because we are a bigger company, we don't qualify for the SME stuff...it's really my role to try and get funding; the funding is just not available though. It's so frustrating.*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]

The cost of covering staff on training courses was also raised as an issue by employers in the Adult Social Care sector where minimum staffing levels need to be maintained:

*The cost is expensive; not only to put people on the course but also we have to pay people whilst attending. So we are paying for the place, paying our staff to attend and we still have to cover the service whilst they are out of the service, and nothing is coming in to cover it.*

[Employer, Health, Early Years and Adult Social Care]

The cost of studying full-time in Higher Education was also identified as a potential barrier to higher level skills development in careers such as architecture where the route to professional qualification is predominantly via a full-time University degree course:

*Some of the graduates we take on are doing a year in industry and they have to go back to uni to finish their degree. In the current climate that is proving very difficult for them financially. People are not finishing their degrees because of financial pressures.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

Some employers wanted to know more about available funding to support graduate recruitment and student placements:

*We have no idea if we took a graduate on or a student how to go about getting funding. it would be nice to know how that works and I hope it's not as long winded and tiring to get the funding as it is in other areas.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

However, concern regarding the funding of higher level qualifications is not shared by employers from the Early Years sectors. The introduction of legislation to ensure that all early years providers have minimum numbers of higher level qualified staff by 2015 has been accompanied by a funding allocation for higher level learning:

*We get a lot of funding at the moment and that gives us the flexibility to help them if they need time out and give them study time. It's so the staff don't have to put their hands in their own pockets too much.*

[Employer, Health, Early Years and Adult Social Care]

## Understanding of employer needs

Views on whether or not the education sector 'have an understanding' of the needs of employers are very variable. Where employers enjoy a good relationship with one or more learning providers they are more likely to feel that the sector understands their needs, or that understanding is increasing:

*I think we have a lot to work with and some of the universities are beginning to understand what we are looking for.*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]

However, a high proportion of our respondents feel that the education sector is out of touch with the needs of SME employers. Perceived lack of understanding commonly related to issues such as course timings and the need to release employees from work and the length of time required to complete qualifications:

*Time is one of the frustrations because colleges want you to spend a whole day out, which for us is a real problem. Because we are quite a small company, giving someone the day off isn't viable and we can't offer this to everyone. It's sort of stopping people from feeling like they are missing out.*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]

A number of respondents from all sectors perceive that the requirements of learning providers, who need to recruit students in sufficient quantities, are at odds to those of the employer, who require selected, high quality employees:

*They are funded by bums on seats which goes against what we want. I have course directors coming up to me and saying I have done X amount of interviews for next year and there are 20 people who have the skills and attitude for the course, but I have been told I have to take 40...it's difficult for the people teaching because they are teaching people who shouldn't be there. It is grim for all concerned.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

In addition, some employers state that pressure on learning providers to retain students at all costs has led to a reduction in quality:

*I think people going through the courses sometimes shouldn't be going through because they have been helped so much. I think far too much support is given to people to get them through courses, but it doesn't help the quality of the service being provided.*

[Employer, Health, Early Years and Adult Social Care]

There is a common perception among some employers from SMEs (who may typically send between 2 and 10 people per year on Higher Education courses) that they are simply too small for local learning providers to target as viable customers, let alone consider their curriculum needs:

*I think as a small employer, there isn't a lot of seeking to find out what we want. I suspect if we were Jaguar or -well maybe not Jaguar anymore -a bigger size, I suspect we'd have somebody coming out to see us, to find out and eventually tailoring the curriculum to the needs of our requirements. I mean this research you're doing, this is the first time we've been asked really so I think they could probably do a bit more.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

There is a general consensus of opinion that learning provider engagement with employers is the key to understanding:

*I think by engaging with employers as much as possible that is their best route to start understanding employers.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

Among Construction employers there is some feeling that understanding of their industry needs to improve at school level in order to promote the profession and higher level courses within it to young people:

*There is this perception by careers advisors that the construction industry is for the lower educated people, to go on a dirty building site and lay some bricks, dig holes and that sort of thing. Whereas we want to talk to the teachers and to the careers advisors and say you are very wrong, there is a lot*

*more to construction than being a simple bricklayer. Everything is a skill now. It's a question of the careers advisors to get over to the students that there is a skill level there. If you get it at that base, it will go through to Higher.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

## **Communication issues**

Some communication issues are reported around the area of work placements. It was striking to see how many companies had work placement students from outside the region, but none from local HE providers.

This respondent reports having approached his local HEI to offer work placements, but receiving no response:

*We have just been trying to find some students who want to do work experience. I have tried on numerous occasions by email and phone calls to try and get into contact with the media department over the last 3 weeks and I haven't heard anything... we can mould and shape them into our area, and I also think being a part of the uni set-up is quite good, just to get involved, so it was quite disappointing not to get anything back.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

Others are less proactive, but have offered work placements to students of institutions outside the region from whom an initial approach had been made:

*We have currently got someone on work placement from Bristol University on a sandwich course, so they have to take a year out in industry. They were the only university to contact us, the student is here for 12 months and they have been here for 6 months.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

A number of respondents would welcome more feedback from some HE providers regarding employees' progress on their courses of study, particularly where individuals are at risk of dropping out:

*We had two guys who finished their first year at the College and then left and we would have hoped that we would have had a better insight from the College. I just wished the alarm bells would have rung sooner.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

*We have no contact with the Uni at all apart from an invoice which we pay.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

### **The Language barrier**

A number of respondents comment on the use of 'academic' language by learning provider representatives and on websites:

*No, I think when you talk to academics you realise that they live around academia, they expect everyone to have lived in that world, which we don't. When you read these course contents it's so airy fairy you don't know what it means! What are they going to learn? It's not written in language that someone outside the field will know what it means.*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]

*Someone came out from the University to talk to my manager...he was talking in such jargon about courses and qualifications...all these academic terms. I could see [my manager] getting more and more fed up and frustrated and I felt like saying, 'Stop it. Can't you see what you're doing?'*

[Employer, Health, Social Care and Early Years]

### **The Economic Downturn**

Unsurprisingly, the economic downturn has had a major impact on local employers, particularly from the Engineering and Construction sectors. Many of our respondents have been forced to make redundancies, suspend recruitment, and scale down on their level of training activity.

For some employers, training has been a casualty of recession:

*We had to make a number of redundancies this year so training naturally wasn't something that we invested lots of money in. It's a bit inappropriate to be making redundancies whilst sending people off to do training, plus the funds were not available.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

However, employers also state that support for training is a relatively inexpensive means of maintaining morale and enabling staff to develop experience which may otherwise have been limited by the economic downturn:

*During a recession it's not easy to give everyone a broad breadth of experience. The actual process of getting out there and doing college work which might involve you in specialist areas or something that you might not be doing at work is I think probably a broadening experience.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

### **Higher level skills development for economic recovery**

The survey process revealed employers working under considerable pressure in extremely challenging circumstances. As we have seen above, some employers have been forced to reduce training activity in response to economic pressures. For some approached to take part in the research, Higher Education was the last thing on their minds:

*We are fighting for our survival here. The last thing we want to think about is Higher Education; we are just focussing all of our efforts on surviving. You're way off-beam asking us about Higher Education at a time like this. We've got other things to think about.*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]

However, the majority of employers who took part in the research are adamant that higher level skills development is essential for the region's economic recovery and the survival of their workforce.

For some, however, reconciling current economic conditions with future skills needs is a challenge:

*It's chicken and the egg though isn't it? As in if you haven't got the money, then you can't do the training, but we need the development to help the economic recovery. It's not an easy one.*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]

Some employers were concerned about highly skilled people leaving the region for better career opportunities. The threat of a 'brain drain' which could jeopardise future economic recovery was also raised by employers from the Engineering and Construction sectors:

*The skills we have in the region are not being employed for the task they are skilled for. They are coming out of our sectors and going into others... if they don't do that they will find pastures greener and leave the region entirely. We are recognised as the most poorly performing region in terms of skills, so those skills we do have leave in droves.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

## **Information needs**

Although there are examples of very positive relationships between employers and learning providers, a significant proportion of our respondents report that they receive little if any information or communication from local education providers;

*I think the education training, going back many years they used to talk to the Engineering companies, when I did my apprenticeship I was in constant dialogue with the colleges or units, but that all seems to have finished. The communication is key to making it work, but there is very little if any at the moment.*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]

However, employers from the Health, Social Care and Early Years sector are most likely to report positive communication from learning providers, highlighting the importance of maintaining this contact:

*It seems to be absolutely fine, we get information through the post and so we can access their database and staff can do that, so I can't see any issues at all. We get approached fairly regularly. Local colleges do keep in touch. It keeps us on top of our game and if they didn't do that we wouldn't know what was going on out there. They are always introducing new courses and other bits and pieces. It's always important to know what is going on.*

[Employer, Health, Early Years and Adult Social Care]

Some employers state that they would welcome more targeted guidance about courses and available funding:

*If you said to me, "Can I spend 2 hours on the phone with you and I am going to get all the information I can about the business and you came back to me in January and said, "Here is the funding that's available and here are the courses that might help", I would say "fantastic let's crack on with it", but now everything is a headache and you have to make a 100 phone calls to get anything sorted.*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]]

The research certainly suggests that there is untapped interest in Higher Education from local SME employers.

*I wouldn't know to be honest what colleges or universities specialise in our type of degree. We would be interested to find out who does... I think forming a relationship like could do no harm whatsoever.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

A small number of employers report accessing information regarding education and training from Advantage West Midlands (AWM) and the Chamber of Commerce. However, there is some confusion regarding the number of organisations offering advice on training:

*I think there is a consensus across the industry that there are too many quango type organisations. You tend to struggle to work out where they fit in the jigsaw. You find that you have so many different places to look.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

Many would welcome a central point of contact for information regarding Higher Education opportunities in the local area with information regarding curriculum content and funding opportunities:

*I don't really know where to go, so a one stop advice centre would be great!*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]

Active involvement in the Coventry and Warwickshire Partnership for Care was cited by a number of employers in the Health, Social Care and Early Years as a highly effective means of keeping in touch with both training issues and local learning providers:

*The Coventry and Warwickshire Partnership for Care they present all the care providers in the county so they have a subgroup with all the training providers. It works very well as long as you are involved.*

[Employer, Health, Early Years and Adult Social Care]

*I think we are quite fortunate in Warwickshire that the Partnership for Care has promoted a lot of the providers. The good thing is we can check how good a training provider is and see how reliable they are and what they provide and we get that from the partnership. Also at times the partnership even invites providers along to tell us about the course and what is going on. At least then we know what we are buying into. It's been very beneficial.*

[Employer, Health, Early Years and Adult Social Care]

### **Preferred methods of approach**

The majority of respondents stated that they would welcome an initial introductory approach from their local learning provider via email:

*I think in the first instance it would be email. Because that is a great communication tool for them and a brochure costs money. First response should be email....or even a questionnaire asking us this and this. Something simple.*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]

This approach could then be followed up by personal contact:

*I would say an email and maybe someone trying to arrange to come to see us. As in a personal visit, where they would come and look at our facilities and see what we do, that way round would be best.*

[Employer, Cultural and Creative Industries]

Not all respondents welcome approaches from learning providers and during the course of this research we encountered resistance from receptionists and other gatekeepers:

*They [learning providers] don't always get past reception. They know who I work with so unless anyone says anything different, it's a waste of my time.*

[Employer, Health, Early Years and Adult Social Care]

Reaching senior members of staff, particularly in larger organisations, requires some persistence.

*I lump them with all the other people who are banging on at me about training and recruitment. Let me do my job and I will go out and find them myself when I need them.*

[Employer, Engineering Sector]

As seen above, any learning provider approaching an SME needs knowledge of the business and a clearly relevant course offer:

*If they have seriously got something good to offer and they really think that they could be competitive in comparison to who we use now, they understand the company and it isn't cold calling and make an appointment to go through their portfolio with me...it would need to stick out; it would have to be new and different.*

[Employer, Health, Early Years and Adult Social Care]

Learning provider websites were criticised by some as difficult to access information from, particularly in relation to individual sectors:

*When they say access the website, it is a minefield because you have to try and find what you are looking for. I think it has to be to the point. For example, if there was a web address for Cov Uni saying 'Cov Uni forward slash Construction' you are in.... you can get straight in there!*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

A number of respondents highlighted the importance of learning providers attending local industry events and integrating with employers:

*There are industry groups or events and it wouldn't be out of order for them to be there flying their flag.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

## Recommendations

Even within a limited geographical area and number of industry sectors, the profile and needs of employers in relation to Higher Education are complex and diverse. Relationships between employers and learning providers are impacted by many, sometimes conflicting, influences. A key starting point for understanding the needs of employers and improving their engagement with Higher Education is to recognise their heterogeneity both in relation to industry sector and as individual organisations.

However, the highly specialist training needs of individual SMEs present a particular challenge to learning providers who must deliver sustainable programmes of delivery which have some general relevance and appeal. The reduction in large private sector employers in recent years has made Coventry and Warwickshire more reliant on its SME base and they present a very significant, and collectively substantial, market for local learning providers.

We see from the research the pivotal importance of curriculum content for employers and the need for learning providers to meet the changing requirements of businesses who themselves are often having to adapt to challenging and uncertain economic conditions.

The traditional methods of publicising and marketing learning opportunities via prospectuses, websites and open days appear to be of limited effectiveness to local businesses. They require a far more personalised approach which demonstrates a familiarity with their business objectives and curriculum requirements. Overall, employers appear to welcome learning provider presence within their industry organisations and at their events and are responsive to a genuine interest in the challenges which they face.

It is critical for learning providers to present clear, detailed, targeted information to employers which does not assume knowledge of qualification and course structures and avoids academic jargon. Learning providers must demonstrate their understanding of employers' sectors and relate their learning offer to their current industry agenda.

The availability of advice relating to funding and curriculum availability is confusing for employers who seem overwhelmed by the range of organisations offering support. Again, consistent and targeted guidance from learning providers could address these concerns.

There are many examples of excellent and mutually beneficial relationships between employer and learning providers. However, there is a clear message from smaller employers that they would like more contact with learning providers than they are currently receiving. Too often, relationships are dependent on individuals and falter when they leave the organisation. It is worrying that a number of employers report a lack of response from learning providers in relation to work experience offers and a lack of interest to employer events. A local business enquiry 'hotline' to local learning providers with named contacts may help to address such issues.

It is evident that meeting the higher level learning needs of local employers calls for more than one single answer; the research shows that there are a large number of areas in which the employer/learning provider relationship could be improved. However, establishing a dialogue between learning providers and local employers will underpin all positive action and place learning providers at the heart of local industry rather than as outsiders. It seems fitting that the final word should go to one of our employers:

*How is the education sector going to help employers? There isn't one answer. There are hundreds of small answers and I think that's the attitude we've got to come at this with. It's got to do everything it's been trying to do a lot more...all of the doors have got to be opened. It's getting involved in industry - it's understanding what bothers people and being part of the solution.*

[Employer, Construction Sector]

We would like to thank all of the employers who so generously gave their time to take part in this research from the following organisations:

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Blitz Games Studios

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Coventry Motor Museum

Geotechnics

Herbert Museum and Art Gallery

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Mahle

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