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# Employee Engagement in the Higher Education Sector: An Evidence Review

Employee Engagement Toolkit



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# Summary

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## What is engagement?

Engagement is consistently shown as something given by the employee which can benefit the organisation through commitment and dedication, advocacy, discretionary effort, using talents to the fullest and being supportive of the organisation's goals and values. Engaged employees feel a sense of attachment towards their organisation, investing themselves not only in their role, but in the organisation as a whole. Although a relatively new concept, the topic of employee engagement has rapidly attracted attention in the course of the last decade.

## The benefits of engagement

Engaged employees are more likely to stay with the organisation; perform 20 per cent better than their colleagues; and act as advocates of the business. Engagement can enhance bottom-line profit and enable organisational agility and improved efficiency in driving change initiatives. Engaged individuals invest themselves fully in their work, with increased self-efficacy and a positive impact upon health and well-being; which in turn evokes increased employee support for the organisation.

## Demographic factors for engagement

Engagement levels can vary according to different biographical and personality characteristics. Younger employees may be positive when they first join an organisation, but can quickly become disengaged. Highly extravert and adaptable individuals find it easier to engage. Engagement is a choice; dependent upon what the employee considers is worth investing themselves in.

## Organisational factors for engagement

Engagement levels vary according to seniority, occupation and length of service in an organisation, but not by sector. Research has shown the more senior an individual's role, the greater the chance of them being engaged. Presidents, managers, operational and hands-on staff tend to be the most engaged; with professionals and support staff the least. However, this varies between organisations.

## Differences between public and private sector

There seems to be a trend of increased awareness for the issue of employee engagement spreading from the private to the public sector. Some of the major public sector employers in the UK, for example the NHS, are already taking employee

engagement very seriously and are trying to actively foster engagement levels. While there are no fundamental differences between the dynamics of employee engagement in the public and private sector, existing variations in engagement levels are considered to reflect the organisational characteristics of the two sectors. At the same time, research findings suggest that the public sector's performance in areas relating to strategic vision, leadership capability and change management (all of which are crucial elements for employee engagement) are weaker than that of the private sector.

## Seven drivers of engagement

There are seven commonly referenced drivers of engagement:

1. the nature of the work undertaken
2. work that has transparent meaning and purpose
3. development opportunities
4. receiving timely recognition and rewards
5. building respectful and assertive relationships
6. having open two-way communication systems, and
7. inspiring leadership.

Although mainly based on private sector research, these identified drivers for engagement can have significant implications for public sector institutions' performances.

## Measuring engagement

Measuring engagement levels is usually achieved through employee surveys; and there are a variety of measures of engagement available. However, the lack of a clear definition of employee engagement and the differing requirements of each organisation means there is likely to be considerable variation in what is measured in these surveys. As a large-scale example for an employee survey, the UK Civil Service has been carrying out service-wide surveys on the topic of engagement since 2009, covering some 500,000 civil servants; and benchmarking the performance across the Civil Service and comparing it with external organisations.

## Changing environment for higher education institutions

Whereas the HE sector used to be considered as a stable, mainly publicly funded sector, higher education institutions (HEIs) are currently facing a range of changes in their policy environment, i.e. increased international competition, cuts in

government funding, new regulations, and restructuring of the sector. In light of these challenges, employee engagement - with its more strategic vision of people management - may help them to attract, develop and retain their human resources during challenging times.

## Barriers to employee engagement in HEIs

While the literature suggests that measures fostering engagement equally affect engagement levels in public and private sector organisations, there is a range of barriers for engagement which are of more concern for public sector institutions. Three particular concerns for institutions in the higher education sector have been identified:

- strategic vision and measures of change management
- the effectiveness of line communication, and
- leadership and concerns on recognition and reward of HE staff.

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# Introduction

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There is a large and growing research and evidence base on the importance of employee engagement for improving performance and building resilience in challenging times of change. This review explores this evidence, with particular reference to the HE context. With a focus on how managers and leaders can foster employee engagement, this review of current management practice will briefly examine the HR theory on this topic; before moving from the evidence base on engagement to its practical application in the context of HE. The report is structured around the key issues for employee engagement in the HE sector which have been identified through a search of up-to-date academic and practitioner literature.

## The employee engagement agenda

Since the early 2000s the topic of employee engagement has entered the HR and management agenda, increasingly attracting the attention of executives and professionals as well as academics. Awareness of the central role that employee engagement plays for commercial and business performance has increased, with literature suggesting that higher engagement levels can have a positive impact on employee turnover, productivity, and financial performance (Baumruk, 2006). Moreover, higher engagement levels may help employers to attract and retain their best talents (e.g. Martin and Hetrick, 2006).

Disengagement, on the other hand, is a major challenge for employers. It is a cause of lower job satisfaction and higher staff turnover. In addition to this, disengaged workers are also most likely to share their discontent with others (Penna, 2006; Gallup, 2006). Recent studies suggest that up to 80 per cent of British workers are not truly committed to their work, while 20 per cent of employees claim to not only be disengaged but to have 'mentally quit' their jobs (Flade, 2003; Hukerby 2002, cited in Pech and Slade, 2006).

Since the beginning of the most recent financial and economic crisis, a number of organisations have been facing a range of challenges including downsizing, shortages of funding, and major changes in their organisational and delivery structures. Employee engagement can play a crucial role in helping organisations deal with these changes, as research has shown that engaged employees tend to be more supportive of change agendas (Graen, 2008). Developing a culture supportive of engagement has therefore become a necessity. However, although more organisations are becoming aware of the importance of employee engagement, many are uncertain of how to enable the conditions for engagement to flourish (Pech and Slade, 2006).

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# Employee engagement in the HE Sector

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*'Within the public sector there is a growing understanding of the importance of engagement as a medium for driving the performance and well-being of public servants.'*

MacLeod and Clarke, 2009: p.5

In the framework of ongoing attempts to modernise and streamline the UK public sector, the concept of employee engagement has increasingly entered the discourse on public sector reforms as both a measure of employee outcome and a workplace approach to improvement (Gatenby et al, 2009). This development can be seen as part of a broader attempt to align public sector institutions' HR management with that of private sector companies. Indeed, some of the major public sector employers in the UK, for example the NHS (both as a whole and within individual NHS trusts), are increasingly taking employee engagement seriously and are trying to actively foster and manage engagement levels.

In the HE sector, people management challenges such as employee engagement are highly complex issues. Today, HEIs have to bring together the interests of a highly diverse group of stakeholders and interest groups. HEIs not only have to meet the expectations of students, staff and employers, but are also increasingly exposed to international competition (HEFCE, 2010). In addition, institutions need to deliver a complex and disparate range of services both internally and externally (Archer, 2005). Moreover, with an education market which has become unmistakably global, new challenges have emerged for HEIs. The major challenge therefore for UK HEIs is to preserve their international reputation in learning, teaching and research, which if lost or diminished, could take years to recover (HEFCE, 2010).

In the report *'Mission Critical? Modernising Human Resource Management in Higher Education'*, Archer (2005) describes a major shift in HR management in UK higher education. Not only are institutions increasingly acknowledging the crucial function of HR, but one study found that among 44 UK universities, Directors of HR were increasingly being hired from outside the sector, with many being new to their post, thus *"indicating a significant recent influx of new thinking"* (p.2). HEIs are currently facing a range of changes in their policy, business and delivery environments. In the context of major cuts in public expenditure the pressure on higher education funding has increased. In addition to decreased government funding, the recent shift towards a more privately-funded HE system could have a serious impact on the HE landscape of the UK (Tompson and Bekhradnia, 2010). The anticipated reduction in both public and private funding might severely affect the affordability of future pay rises and pension contributions of HE staff; growth in student numbers; and the income from international student fees (HEFCE, 2010). Another major transformation is taking place in the UK HE landscape (Ramsden, 2012): while the institutional

diversity within the sector continues to persist, the number of HEIs in the UK varies year on year, as new institutions are launched funded by the further education sector and private providers, and institutions merge – mostly involving the takeover of smaller specialist institutions by larger ones.

It is in this context that HEIs have to find a way to adapt and change in order to maintain high-quality outputs. Considering the changing environment within which HEIs are operating (with its more strategic vision on HR and people management) employee engagement may help HEIs by attracting, developing and retaining the best people. As the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2010) puts it:

*‘Higher education relies on its ability to attract, retain and motivate talented staff. It is important that each higher education institution (HEI) can position itself as an ‘employer of choice’ for the most able staff and is able to engage, develop, motivate and reward its staff competitively’ (p.3).*

Fostering employee engagement, therefore, might help to fight off recruitment raids from overseas institutions, and being an ‘employer of choice’ will in the long run also have an effect on how well UK HEIs are able to compete with other institutions internationally (Archer, 2005).

## What is engagement?

Understanding the nature of engagement is an important yet complex challenge, as companies, consultancies and academics use numerous (often inconsistent) definitions of engagement. Engagement is variously conceived as a psychological or affective state, a performance construct, or an attitude. Three broad approaches can be distinguished:

- **Company-based models** viewing engagement as an outcome: engaged employees show commitment, loyalty, exert discretionary effort, use their talents to the fullest, and are enthusiastic advocates of their organisation’s values and goals. Many see engagement as a step higher than satisfaction or motivation.
- **Academic definitions** focus on outcomes of engagement (advocacy, dedication, discretionary effort, fostering change); the psychological state (employees fully involve themselves in work, are absorbed, focused and energised); and the two-way beneficial relationship between employer and employee.
- **Consultancy-based models** define engagement as a psychological state with numerous business outcomes for the organisation; and consider the role of the organisation in enabling it. Engagement results from having a line of sight between individual and business performance so that staff understand their contribution; as well as a culture that values, encourages and listens to staff.

All sources define engagement to some degree by its outcomes and describe it as something given by the employee which can benefit the organisation. They generally agree that engaged employees feel a sense of attachment towards their organisation, investing themselves not only in their role, but in the organisation as a whole.

In 2003, an IES consultation of HR professionals from 46 organisations found they perceived engaged employees to be individuals who show a belief in the organisation, have a desire to work to make things better, have an understanding of the business context and the 'bigger picture', respect and help their colleagues, have a willingness to 'go the extra mile' and keep up-to-date with developments in the field (Robinson et al, 2004). As a result of this study IES developed a comprehensive definition of engagement:

*'A positive attitude held by the employee towards the organisation and its values. An engaged employee is aware of business context and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organisation. The organisation must work to develop and nurture engagement which requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee'.*

Robinson et al, 2004, pg 4

## The benefits of engagement

*'Work engagement is a positive experience in itself'* (Schaufeli et al, 2002 cited in Sonnentag, 2003). *'Employee engagement is a hard-nosed proposition that not only shows results but can be measured in costs of recruitment and employee output'* (Johnson, 2004 p.1). As the latter quotation suggests, there are numerous outcomes of investing in improving employee engagement and there is a fair amount of consistency in the practitioner and academic literature regarding the benefits of doing so. These benefits can be broadly categorised in organisational outcomes and employee outcomes. From an organisational perspective:

- Engaged employees are more likely to stay with the organisation (Levinson, 2007) and are more likely to 'stick around' when the organisation is struggling to survive (BlessingWhite, 2008).
- Engaged employees perform 20 per cent better than their colleagues (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004); they are more willing to go the 'extra mile'; and they act as advocates of the organisation (Scottish Executive Social Research, 2007).
- Engagement can have a significant impact on the performance of the organisation, driving bottom-line profit through increased productivity, customer loyalty, increased sales or better retention levels (Cleland et al, 2008).

- Engagement can improve organisational agility in companies and organisations forced to adapt to changing markets, and improve efficiency in driving change initiatives (Graen, 2008).

From an employee perspective:

- Engagement may enable individuals to invest themselves fully in their work (Seijts and Crim, 2006); with increased self-efficacy and a positive impact upon the employee's health and well-being (Mauno et al, 2007; Rothbard, 2001); which in turn evokes increased employee support for the organisation.

## Variations in engagement

Before exploring how an organisation can foster engagement, it is important to note that engagement levels can vary among employees and/or over time due to different individual engagement as well as job and organisational characteristics affecting engagement. Literature describes two broad groups of factors influencing engagement:

### 1) Socio-demographic factors for engagement

- Engagement levels can vary according to different biographical and personality characteristics, such as gender, age, caring responsibilities or more work-related factors such as how new somebody is to an organisation, working hours, pay or position in the organisation (Balain and Sparrow, 2009). Generally speaking, engagement can be seen as a choice, dependent upon what the employee considers worth investing him/herself in.
- Research findings are ambiguous on whether younger employees are more or less engaged than their older counterparts: Some scholars suggest that younger workers are less engaged which they partly explain by their junior levels in an organisation (BlessingWhite, 2008; Sinclair et al, 2008). Other findings however, suggest that younger employees show the highest engagement levels compared to all other age groups, especially when this is combined with low lengths of service (Robinson et al, 2004 and 2007).
- Engagement levels have also been linked to individual attitudes and traits. Some individuals may have engagement-orientating personality traits which make them more likely for being engaged. High extravert and adaptable individuals, for example, generally find it easier to engage (Macey and Schneider, 2008).

### 2) Organisational factors for engagement

- Research suggests that engagement levels vary according to seniority, occupation and length of service within an organisation, but not by sector. As yet, there has

been no evidence in the literature suggesting that engagement differs between public and private sector organisations. Findings suggest, however, that with higher seniority the chance of being engaged rises (Towers Perrin, 2003), which could suggest that increased engagement is an outcome of power and position (BlessingWhite, 2008). Engagement can also differ according to different roles within the organisation. Senior managers, operational, and hands-on staff tend to be the most engaged with their organisations, professionals and support staff the least; but the latter two groups typically have high engagement levels with their jobs (Robinson et al, 2007).

## **Socio-demographic and organisational challenges in the HE sector**

While literature suggests that there is no significant difference between the dynamics of employee engagement in the public and private sector, existing variations in engagement levels seem to reflect both organisational and employee characteristics of the two sectors.

As Ipsos MORI highlight (2006, cited in Scottish Executive Social Research, 2007), public sector employees tend to be happier concerning job security, payment, training and development opportunities, feedback received by managers and working hours. On the other hand, Ipsos MORI (2006) found that the public sector lags behind the private sector in change management and leadership capability: according to their findings only 65 per cent of public sector staff support change, compared to 75 per cent in the private sector; and in addition public sector employees more frequently feel that changes being implemented are unnecessary. Although public sector employees are generally more satisfied with their jobs compared to their private sector counterparts, they seem to be significantly less satisfied with some of the key drivers of employee engagement. Research from Canada shows, for example, that although public service employees are relatively happy with their job, they would not recommend it to a friend seeking employment, due to what they describe as a climate of distrust; a lack of confidence in their managers; and the feeling that their job is negatively viewed from outside the organisation (Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia, 2002, cited in Scottish Executive Social Research, 2007).

More recently, research has increasingly focused on the topic of junior staff in the HE sector. A number of authors have come to the conclusion that entering employment in an HEI can be challenging for junior staff or those joining from practice settings, especially in terms of clarity of expectations as well as in adjusting their identities to a career in HEI (Archer, 2008; Smith, 2010). Furthermore, research suggests that due to a range of factors, e.g. an expansion of practitioner disciplines and blurred boundaries between academic and professional groupings and careers, careers in the HE sector have become more complex and less transparent.

Given that some people seem to be more engaged than others and with the known benefits likely outweighing the costs of any intervention aimed at raising engagement levels, how can organisations enable engagement in practice?

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# Drivers and barriers to engagement

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A 'one size fits all' approach to enabling engagement is ineffective, because levels of engagement and its drivers vary according to the organisation, employee group, the individual and the job itself. Robinson et al (2007) suggests that it is very clear that *'an organisation, personal characteristics, job characteristics and employee experiences all influence engagement levels'*. This assumption is clearly supported by the numerous drivers, spanning these themes, presented in the practitioner and academic literature to date. Overall, existing research most frequently highlights seven key drivers of employee engagement.

1. **The nature of the work** has a clear influence on the level of engagement. Much of the literature has spoken of the importance of having challenging and varied work that utilises old and new skills (see for example May et al, 2004; Lockwood, 2007). The work needs to be perceived as interesting, creative and/or exciting for the employee. Employees also need to feel that the work they are doing is important for themselves and for others. This is a key driver highlighted in both the practitioner and academic literature.
2. A perception that the **work undertaken is important**, and has a **clear purpose and meaning** (Lockwood, 2007; Kahn, 1990; May et al, 2004). Employees need to feel proud of the work they and their organisation do, and they need to feel as though they are making a difference. Having a line of sight between individual and organisational performance, and an organisation that shows how important individuals' roles are to organisational success, may be important in enabling this. This, too, is seen as a key driver in both the practitioner and academic literature.
3. **Development opportunities:** having equal opportunities for, and access to, career growth, development and training opportunities is considered important in enabling employees to engage with the organisation (The Conference Board, 2006). For employees to perform well they need to have the right skills for the job, and their roles need to encompass work that the employee knows how to do but with scope to learn new skills and develop the role. This development needs to be encouraged by managers and the organisation, and continuous feedback mechanisms should be in place to tackle development needs as they arise. Employees who are engaged feel empowered, are confident in achieving in their role and have opportunities to perform at their best (Bates, 2004; Melcrum, 2007). Whilst the development of new skills is mentioned in the academic literature, it is proposed more strongly in the practitioner.
4. **Recognition and reward:** receiving timely recognition and reward is a key driver of engagement (Melcrum, 2007; Robinson et al, 2004). The degree of formality of such recognition is determined by circumstances and what is appropriate. Salary

is important but more as a disengager than an engager (Robinson et al, 2007). Employees need to feel valued and appreciated in the work they do.

5. **Effective and assertive relationships:** building good relationships between co-workers is important, especially the relationship between employee and manager (Dulye, 2006; Kenexa, 2008 cited in WFC, 2008). This critical relationship needs to be a reciprocal one of making time for, and listening to, one another. This is potentially accomplished by rewarding achievement, and demonstrating trust by allowing autonomy. Developing mutual respect and trust between colleagues and managers is seen as key to enabling employees to engage with the organisation. Employees want to be respected as individuals and the culture needs to deliver this.
6. **Quality communications:** employees may engage in an organisation if they can understand the organisation's values and goals, and developments in these. They need to understand how their own role contributes, and the resources available to deliver them; as well as feeling well-informed about what is happening in the organisation (Sinclair et al, 2008). Only through having formal and open two-way communication between managers and staff, such as having opportunities for upwards feedback without fear of repercussions, can employees access this information. Consulting employees in decision-making processes enables them to feel that they are being heard, and may instil a sense of ownership over the outcomes.
7. **Inspiring leadership:** leaders and managers who inspire confidence in individuals, giving them autonomy to make decisions with clear goals and accountability, are perceived as engaging. Organisational processes must give managers the flexibility to instil this in employees and adopt a collaborative management style. The actions and integrity of leaders and line managers are vitally important in enabling engagement (Macey and Schneider, 2008a).
8. Managers must also be visibly committed to the organisation and display a genuine responsibility to their employees and the wider communities, particularly in terms of their wellbeing. Managers need also to be fair and honest in their judgements and responsibilities and foster a sense of involvement and value.

## Academic theories on engagement in the HE sector

The academic literature on employee engagement in the HE sector is still very limited and little work has been conducted to understand which aspects of the organisation employees engage with; and whether this varies between academics and administration staff/professional services. Work by Dr Monica Franco-Santos (2012, telephone discussion) has begun to explore this area and although the research is still within its primary stages, she has developed a number of hypotheses drawing upon a range of well established theories within the academic literature, namely:

extrinsic (individuals who engage in the work in order to obtain some goal that is apart from the work itself such as rewards) and intrinsic (individuals who engage in work to seek enjoyment, interest, satisfaction of curiosity, self-expression or personal challenge in the work) motivation theories; and self-determination theory (a macro theory of motivation, personality and optimal functioning).

Following interviews with academics and professional staff and case study analysis within six universities (three of which were more research focused and three of which were more teaching focused) she suggests, in its simplest form, that those employees who are responsible for delivering professional services within universities are inherently more extrinsically motivated and academics are inherently more intrinsically motivated (although this may be too simplified and other interactions will also have an effect). As intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can have very different effects on subjective feelings about the work, eagerness to do the work and the quality of the performance, it is therefore essential that leaders and managers of HE institutions understand these factors so that they can deal effectively with the differing human motivations at play within the organisation.

Self-determination theory has sought to understand how extrinsic and intrinsic motivation can be maintained. In performance management terms, it is likely that different management techniques will need to be employed to maintain the engagement of extrinsically and intrinsically motivated individuals. Those who are extrinsically motivated are likely to need more specification and direction in how the work is accomplished; more 360 degree critical feedback; more emphasis on deadlines; the promise of rewards for completed tasks; and more praise for work that is done well. However as intrinsic motivators are an endogenous part of a person's engagement in the activity, then different management tactics will be required. For instance, research showed that when people received money as a reward for doing an interesting activity they were less interested in the activity and less likely to do it later, than those who did the same activity without getting the reward (Deci 1971). This suggests that participants who had been initially intrinsically motivated to carry out an activity felt that their sense of autonomy had been undermined when the activity was controlled by the reward and so were reluctant to undertake it. The reward was seen as an instrument of social control and can therefore thwart people's need for autonomy (deCharms 1968) something which is greatly valued by intrinsically motivated people. However, when people are given more choice over their activity (Reeve et al 2003), or more control, then this can have positive effects on their intrinsic motivation by increasing their sense of autonomy. Other research guided by self-determination theory, carried out by Kasser and Ryan (1996) identified meaningful relationships, personal growth and community contributions as being important values that fall into the category of intrinsic goals. It is therefore important that managers, in order to foster intrinsic motivation, develop policies and actions that allow people a sense of control over their work, promote the meaningfulness of their work, allow them to grow and develop in their career and in

their research interests; and also establish a sense of community that is supportive and trusting and allows them to formulate ideas with their colleagues.

This is not to say, however, that some extrinsic motivators cannot operate to increase the engagement levels of people who tend to be more intrinsically motivated. For example, overall project goals that orient a person toward the nature of the task to be accomplished, or rewards that involve more time or freedom to pursue exciting ideas, should add to rather than detract from intrinsic motivation and high-level performance. Similarly, performance feedback, including 360 degree feedback, should enhance intrinsic motivation and performance if it is constructive, non-threatening and work-focused rather than person-focused (Amabile 1993).

Work on developing creativity (a factor which is fundamental to the role of an academic) has also linked in with theories of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Creativity depends on two performance aspects: novelty (ideas that are different from what has been done before); and appropriateness (ideas that are useful, valuable or appropriate to a significant problem). Intrinsic motivation is seen to be more important at some stages of the creative process than others, namely the problem presentation and idea generation stage. At later stages extrinsic motivation may play a facilitative role. At these points setting clear deadlines or the promise of extrinsic rewards and recognition, may do no harm (since flexibility and creative thinking is no longer the dominant mode); and these motivators, as long as they leave the self-determination intact, should serve to keep the individual engaged in the work (Amabile 1993). Moreover, the extrinsic motivators may actually enhance the appropriateness or value of the work, by attuning the individual to outcome requirements. Whilst intrinsic motivation may be essential for novelty in the work, some degree of some types of extrinsic motivation may help to ensure that the output is timely, complete and useful (Amabile 1993).

This is a very simplified view of a number of complex academic motivational theories and interested parties should read Deci and Vansteenkiste (2004) and Amabile (1993) for more in-depth discussions. However, it does highlight the complexity of the situation within an academic environment and shows that a range of management processes are required when attempting to maintain engagement levels within different employee groups due to their differing motivational drivers and the current stage of their work (creative, novel stage, or final product stage). This needs to be taken into account when developing performance management strategies as well as considering which aspects different employees tend to engage with. For instance, if academics are inherently more intrinsically motivated, do they tend to engage more with their own research and their colleagues/team/department, rather than with the wider organisation - which could play more of a key role in the engagement of administrative staff who may be more extrinsically motivated? Dr Franco-Santos' work is due to conclude in October and it is hoped that this work will add significant knowledge to the area.

## Particular barriers faced by HEIs

While the literature suggests that the above seven drivers for engagement impact on engagement levels in both public and private sector organisations, there are a range of barriers to engagement which are of more concern for public sector institutions. From the evidence, three areas can be identified that are of particular concern for institutions in the HE sector.

### Strategic vision and change management

*'The future workforce requirements for the HE sector will be largely influenced by the factors driving change for the English HE sector nationally and globally. Staff in HE must continue to adapt and change in response to these factors and the new expectations on staff, in order to maintain a high-quality higher education sector.'*

HEFCE, 2010: p.3

Similar to organisations in the private sector, public sector organisations experience major changes in their policy environment which they need to adapt to. Confronted with constraints in budget, legislation and the needs of the related public institutions they are serving, transformations may become even more challenging for public sector institutions (Banks, 2006). In addition to these challenges, research findings suggest that the public sector's performance in areas relating to strategic vision and change management, both crucial elements for employee engagement, is weaker than that of the private sector (Scottish Executive Social Research, 2007). Moreover, as Archer (2005) notes, the rich heritage of universities may sometimes result in a *'robust resistance to change'*. In order to effectively deal with the challenges with which HEIs are currently confronted, these institutions need to be both flexible and agile. With strategic workforce planning remaining a relatively under-developed HR management process in HE, stimulating change as part of strategic development is more difficult for HEI (HEFCE, 2010).

### Line communication and leadership

*'Effective performance management and high-quality leadership, governance and management are essential in forming the foundation of a successful, high-quality HE workforce.'*

HEFCE, 2010: p.3

Strategic human resource management plays a crucial role in institutional success of HEIs. In light of the changing environment within which HEIs are operating, more and more institutions are modernising their HR management. While *'the modernisation of HR has had the greatest impact with top teams and senior management (...), there is still a long way to go before line managers consider personnel to be a part of their job'* (Archer, 2005: p.2). As Archer concludes, these constraints can have a

considerable negative impact on the institution's ability to align institutional ambition with individual performances.

Another issue that Archer describes is that of a range of institutional arrangements in HEIs which might hinder an effective line manager-employee relationship: *'There are wide variations between institutions in terms of the operational and strategic dimensions of HR (breadth), whether HR responsibilities are shared with other support services (scope) and where HR stops and managerial line responsibility starts (reach)'* (p.6). Also the Government's MacLeod Review of employee engagement (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009) highlights the issue of ineffective line communication as a form of disengagement practice. The report quotes previous findings from the Kingston Business School, which identify a *'lack of fluidity in communications and knowledge sharing, due to rigid communication channels or cultural norms'* and *'low perception of senior management visibility and quality of downward communication'* as some of the main factors contributing to disengagement (p. 68).

## Recognition and reward

While the literature often suggests that public sector workers are more engaged in their work due to an intrinsic reward afforded by performing public service, often referred to as *'public sector ethos'*, employee surveys do not always support this assumption (Gatenby et al, 2009). Also in the HE setting, rewards and incentives need to strike a balance between extrinsic, primarily monetary; and intrinsic, non-financial, motivators. Using the example of the University of Montreal, Mathieu (2003) describes how an HEI achieved this difficult balance through increased *'support and recognition'* for the period between appointment and the granting of tenure. In more general terms, the issue of how to link professional and organisational development in a way that motivates HE staff, is a subject widely discussed in the literature (see for example Gordon, 2003).

Moreover, as in other sectors, pay and reward are crucial factors for maintaining an engaged workforce in the HE sector. Particularly, HEIs have to find a way to strike a balance between adequately rewarding people for their contributions while remaining affordable and not threatening the institution's future financial sustainability (HEFCE, 2010).

This section has explored what the literature says enables and hinders employees to engage with their work and their organisations. The next section will explore the various tools available to measure levels of employee engagement in organisations.

## How to measure engagement

Engagement is a measurable construct. There are numerous employee attitude surveys in use currently, many developed in-house by organisation's HR departments with the aim of measuring engagement levels in the company. There are

also a number of measures produced by large consultancies and survey houses that allow organisations to benchmark their levels of engagement against data derived from hundreds or thousands of companies.

A widely acknowledged and used means for measuring engagement is the employee engagement survey. These are administered periodically as a gauge to show how well the organisation is doing. Because of the diversity in the definition and use of employee engagement, and the differing requirements of each organisation, there is likely to be wide variation between all such measures and, as a result, organisations are left with a dilemma when choosing which would be best:

*'Organisations may have to choose between a standard measure that does not quite meet their requirements, but enables benchmarking, and a customised measure that is ideal in every way except for the ability to compare with other organisations.'*

Robinson et al, 2007, p. 24

When measuring engagement, employers can explore a variety of factors including the extent of an employee's pride in their organisation, their willingness to go the extra mile, be selfless and act as a team player, their belief in the organisation's products and services and their belief that the organisation enables them to perform at their best (Robinson et al, 2007).

*'The employee survey is the diagnostic tool of choice in the battle for the hearts of employees. Some companies ask workers about their work experiences as infrequently as every other year, looking for major trends. Others take the pulse of the people as often as every month to address the little things that get in the way of employees doing their jobs. Regardless of frequency, the most effective surveys ask questions that can lead to specific corrective actions and that demonstrate a long-term commitment to providing a rewarding work experience, as several organisations have found.'*

Bates, 2004

Organisations will find a range of measurements for engagement, e.g. The Gallup Workplace Audit, Roffey Park Institute's Engagement Diagnostic Services, NetPromoter, The Towers Perrin Rapid Engagement Diagnostic Survey and The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale. IES has also developed a statistically reliable measure of engagement which consists of twelve attitudinal statements that examine organisational citizenship, commitment, aligning individual and organisational values, and the extent to which the organisation enables the individual to perform well (Robinson et al, 2007).

For any organisation wishing to undertake an exploration of the levels of engagement present at a given time, organisations need to consider how the results will be translated into action. To achieve buy-in to, and employees confidence and trust in the survey, the proposed actions that will be taken as a result of the survey feedback need to be transparent. Employees also need to be aware that actions taken

will be directly related to the feedback received, so they feel as though they are being listened to and that what they say counts (Ayers, quoted in Bates, 2004).

Since 2009 the UK Civil Service has been carrying out service-wide employee surveys on the topic of engagement, covering some 500,000 civil servants, reflecting the growing importance of this policy issue (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009). In their attempt to understand how to improve their employees' engagement levels, they try to evaluate what is driving engagement among their employees, benchmark their performance across the Civil Service and compare it with external organisations, and co-ordinate the feedback received by their staff (Civil Service, 2012). There are also some examples of employee attitude surveys designed specifically for the HE sector, for example the Higher Education Survey of Employee Engagement developed by the Institute of Organizational Excellence at the University of Texas (Institute of Organizational Excellence at the University of Texas).

Given the changing environment within which UK HEIs are operating, high engagement levels have the potential to help institutions to effectively deal with these new challenges. In this light, how can institutions in the higher education sector maximise engagement among their employees?

## Developing a culture supportive of engagement

*'One question still challenges many organisations in their quest to improve performance: What can be done to significantly impact employee engagement?'* (People Management, 2008). Improving levels of employee engagement does not have to be expensive; it just takes some time and energy, but benefits will outweigh these costs (Bates, 2004).

In 2004 IES proposed (Robinson et al, p.xii), that attempts to increase levels of engagement are likely be ineffective, unless several factors are present in the organisation:

- good quality line management
- two-way communication
- effective internal co-operation
- a focus on development
- commitment to employee wellbeing
- clear, accessible HR policies and practices and visible commitment to these by managers at all levels.

These clearly resemble the common drivers found in the literature; namely the nature of the work, work that has transparent meaning and purpose, development opportunities, receiving timely recognition and rewards, building respectful and

assertive relationships, having open and honest two-way communication and consultation systems, and having inspiring leadership.

Awareness of these drivers suggests several implications for organisations in their endeavour to increase levels of engagement. These are described below:

- **Understand that engagement is a two-way proposition.** Nurturing engagement requires a two-way relationship and commitment between employer and employee (Robinson et al, 2007; Johnson, 2004 p.2). It is '*a mutual contract between employer and employee, the company is responsible for building a meaningful workplace. Employees have a responsibility for contributing to an engaging workplace.*' (Rude, Vice President of HR at Stryker Corp, quoted in Bates, 2004). Organisations therefore must seek to build cultures where people are not afraid to give upwards feedback and have honest and open communication at all levels.
- **Understand the needs and expectations of employees.** To enable engagement, employers need to understand the expectation of their employees and what motivates them. This has significant implications for job design to ensure that the meaning and purpose of the role are clearly defined. By designing jobs that promote employee engagement, organisations can guarantee that workers will be challenged and stimulated, given authority, autonomy, access to information and resources as well as growth and development opportunities; which are considered important drivers in many of the studies mentioned.
- **Demonstrate commitment to the wellbeing of employees and the wider world and its impact.** As Levinson (2007) suggests, engagement is mostly likely to occur when employees understand how their organisation's commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities is making a difference to employees and their communities. Thus, companies must understand that CSR is important to their employees. They need to seek the views of employees over how best to engage in CSR and well-being activities. This can be achieved through mechanisms such as employee surveys.
- **HR and line managers: both managers and HR have a key role in enabling engagement.** '*Employee engagement is ... something that can't succeed by being managed by HR alone. Certainly HR has the skills and tools to assist but it is the line managers who need to know how to engage their people*' (Johnson, 2004 p.1). The provision of support and training to employees is vital. HR must have transparent and fair policies and systems, which managers are committed and trained in how to implement effectively.
- **Link individual and organisational performance.** Organisations need to communicate the importance of individual contribution to successful business outcomes and there needs to be a clear line of sight between the two. Linking individual assessment to business outcomes may help embed this.

- **Encourage and enable development.** The development needs of employees must be identified and acted upon.

## Recent work on engagement and wellbeing in the HE sector

A recent national project entitled '*Improving performance through wellbeing and engagement*' (Shutler-Jones 2011) funded by the HEFCE, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), has built on research linking engagement and wellbeing by developing interventions within a number of HEIs with the aim of increasing engagement levels of staff in well-being programmes in order to improve their physical and psychological wellbeing. Following Phase One, there is an extensive literature review on the area of wellbeing and engagement (see UCEA website for further details). Phase Two aimed to pilot and evaluate a broad range of interventions within an HE environment in order to understand their impact on individuals and institutions as well as outline the key learning points for best practice implementation. This phase of the project was delivered through a consortium of 12 institutions, with each one selecting an intervention they wished to design, implement and evaluate internally. Each institution was required to resource the intervention themselves but they also received some support from the central project team as well as two days consultancy from Robertson Cooper Ltd. The interventions were designed to cover a diverse range of topics. For more information on the institutions involved and the implemented interventions see: the [UCEA website](#) or [www.wellbeing.ac.uk](http://www.wellbeing.ac.uk).

The work focused predominantly on the wellbeing agenda. However, many of the learning points extracted from the successful implementation of the interventions can be applied to the wider context of how to increase staff engagement and involvement when designing, implementing and evaluating other initiatives within the HE sector. The Shutler-Jones (2011) report highlights a number of points that need to be considered when attempting to engage staff.

- Review what activities are already in place at the institution to encourage staff engagement; and then establish how these can be built upon to develop a more strategic approach.
- Promote the agenda using terminology which is consistent with the culture of the organisation; for instance some institutions may not understand the term engagement and therefore more appropriate terminology should be considered.
- Senior managers need to buy into the initiative. It is important to have a visible and vocal champion in the senior team who can ensure that the work is appropriately prioritised, resourced and pushed through. This could be the Vice Chancellor but does not necessarily have to be. At the University of Bradford, for example, the Finance Director acted as the 'Champion for Well-being'. In addition to this it is important to have local champions at different levels who can support

peer-to-peer communication and push the agenda through at a lower level. Both the leadership and management level staff (including academics) need to buy into the initiative/programme to ensure that it succeeds.

- Use a multi-disciplinary approach that brings together key individuals across the institute from both an academic and administrative background who can help to push through the agenda more effectively. See the University of Chester, for example, for more information on how they worked with a range of Faculties and Masters students to promote their agenda on physical health.
- Learn from other institutions that have undertaken similar work with their staff. It is important to link in with peers and other organisations regularly to share ideas and best practice; as well as using tools and resources developed by other organisations such as the Business in the Community (BITC) and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD).
- Do not attempt to engage staff in the same way for each employee group within the institution. As outlined earlier, academics, professional services and administrative staff may be motivated and engaged by different factors and therefore a 'one-size fits all' approach is not recommended.
- Ensure that the processes are in place to listen to staff and act upon what they say. Employee surveys are a useful tool to accomplish this, but it is important that the results are acted upon (or clear reasons given as to why issues were not addressed) otherwise this will deter people from engaging with future surveys.

This is a brief summary of the work that has been conducted by Shutler-Jones (2011). For more information on the project and for case study examples of implementing initiatives within the HE sector, see [www.wellbeing.ac.uk](http://www.wellbeing.ac.uk).

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## Case study examples

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As previously highlighted, for case study examples on successfully implementing interventions that increase engagement and well-being in the HE sector, please see the UCEA website and the project '*Improving performance through well-being and engagement*' (Shutler-Jones 2011). There are also a number of case studies on employee engagement interventions throughout the UCEA/UHR toolkit on employee engagement.

In addition to this though, there have been interventions conducted within the NHS which have successfully encouraged the engagement and involvement of staff. The NHS has some aspects in common with HE: firstly, different professions motivated by different factors, and sometimes engaging more with their field than with their employing NHS Trust; and secondly, a strong trade union presence. Two examples, with learning points, are available as part of the UCEA/UHR toolkit:

- Improving employee engagement and wellbeing in Mersey Care NHS Trust
- Employee voice at Bolton NHS Foundation Trust

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