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Voluntary and collective employer engagement and agency around the high-skill supply-demand relationship of education & training and VET in England

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the underexamined idea of employer engagement as the institutional agency around the supply-demand relationship surrounding education and training (E&T) and VET in England (2012), arguing why VET needs are still likely to be unmet. A single case-study methodology and forty convergent interviews with high-skill employers and policy stakeholders revealed three types of highly constrained employer agencies, in England's Northwest Bioregion, during a period when policy institutions faced restructuring and closure. The research is set against the backdrop of a previously failed and historically repeatedly revised VET institutional environment. In further addressing the lack of empirical evidence on the employer engagement problems faced by policy stakeholders during 2012, it reveals an individualised, voluntary, yet expected weak employer agency around supply-side initiatives. Also, a voluntary yet collective employer agency underpins the wider challenged efforts of policy stakeholders in engaging employers around E&T/VET, while also evident is a collective progressive employer agency around high-skill VET linked to R&D production. Discussions highlight the influence of supply-/demand-side constraints for current VET, questioning what has really changed.

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Introduction

This article addresses the weak scholarly interest in conceptualising employer engagement around an acknowledged constrained relationship between government supply-side measures and the education and training (E&T) or the wider vocational education and training (VET) needs of industry (Keep and Mayhew 2010; Irwin 2008, 66). While the research is positioned in the UK's neo-liberal economy, it is focused in the English context, drawing on debates which consistently question the persistent skills shortages and mismatch in E&T/VET between the supply and demand side (employers) (Green et al. 2015; Keep and Mayhew 2010; Ryan, Gospel, and Lewis 2007). Notably, this mismatch in England is attributed to the weak employer engagement by the supply side, an argument that is consistent in studies that explore the (in)effectiveness of, for example, supporting supply-side institutions (e.g. HE), agencies (e.g. Sector Skills Councils) or policies (e.g. work-based programmes; apprenticeships) (Durazzi 2018; Ingold & Stuart, 2015; Payne 2013; Lloyd and Payne 2005). Similar constraints around the supply-demand relationship are observed in demand-side (employer) arguments, where the need for a greater employer influence towards supply-side institutions and measures is recognised (Keep and Mayhew 2010).

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Against the backdrop of these and further arguments which recognise historical failures around repeatedly revised supply-side institutional VET in England, this article speaks to the lack of empirical evidence on the employer engagement problems faced by policy stakeholders and vice versa, circa 2012. In doing so, it conceptualises and explores how employer engagement manifests as a form of institutional agency around the constrained relationship between the supply and demand side notably around high-skill E&T/VET. Moreover, in drawing on this analysis and in consideration of a much-changed institutional VET environment since 2012, this article presents implications for current and future E&T/VET trends, highlighting what has really changed since (Dobbins and Plows 2017).

Arguably, such a comparison is needed in view of the current new VET landscape where the HE sector is now a significant VET delivery agent (UK Universities, 2013:5), in tackling skills shortages such as in the technology and Life Sciences sectors (Guardian 2021). Also remaining relevant are arguments which specify the long-standing disconnect between government institutions, VET reforms and employer and industry requirements in tackling industry-wide and labour market skills shortages (Dobbins and Plows 2017; Keep and Mayhew 2010). Such historical weaknesses stem from the constraints in competitive markets around E&T and VET provision (e.g. Further Education colleges) and from the persistent employer disengagement faced by Government-funded industry-level business development, training and skills institutions and agencies (e.g. Sector Skills Councils; Regional development Agencies) (UKCES, 2009; Leitch 2006; Payne 2008a). The failure of such institutions in tackling (regional, sectoral) labour market, industry-wide and employer-specific E&T/VET concerns, their closure (e.g. RDAs) and even repeated restructuring are raised in evaluative arguments and reports (Keep, Mayhew, and Payne 2006; Peck and McGuinness 2003; Payne 2008b; NSA 2009; BIS 2011). Insights also associate the weak employer engagement with these institutions to the questionable employer interest in their E&T and VET structures, associated voluntary employer engagement, employer funding issues, and narrowly drawn supply-side reforms (Keep and Mayhew 2010; Payne 2008a,b).

Regardless, the influence of the supply side and its institutions remains prominent, notably in the Federation for Industry Sector Skills and Standards (DCLG 2017), tasked alongside existing agencies (e.g. Sector Skills Councils) to support the National Apprenticeship Service - this now boosts a characteristic employer-led HE and FE partnership framework overseen by the Institute for apprenticeships and technical education (IfATE) and Treasury-initiated employer levy system. The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) supports adult-level VET provision in England in localities not supported by a Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA), although this funding route has also been subject to frequent change such as in its withdrawal of funding for 16–19 provisions (in September 2020).

In England, 48 university technical colleges (Long and Bolton 2017; DoE 2018a) are tasked with the growing demand for VET (Long and Bolton 2017; British Council 2017). Whether these renewed measures ultimately mirror the historical difficulties of previous VET remains to be seen (e.g. bureaucratic employer levies, training provider concerns and mounting employer costs in initialling VET; inadequate technical training coverage – Brockmann and Laurie 2016; Keep 2015; Brockmann, Clarke, and Winch 2015). Certainly, reports questioning their effectiveness have since surfaced, further around a UK HE sector that faces its own challenges, namely, around reduced R&D funding in England (Long and Bolton 2017; DoE 2018b). These constraints suggest a changing yet still questionably challenged E&T/VET landscape in England (Payne 2008a). Notwithstanding much comment over the last decade or so, a conspicuous gap is explanation focused on the UK's supply side, how its institutions and agencies have fared within a context of employer voluntarism and the business case emphasis around E&T/VET that still persists (Sutherland 2016, 47). Moreover, a nationwide emphasis on low value-added business production and its demand for the employment of low-pay labour coupled with weak industry-wide worker representation further contribute to stifling the demand for also VET opportunities (Green and Sakamoto 2001, 56–89; Lindsay, Canduela, and Raeside 2012). Ultimately, besides the research that examines the wider concerns surrounding VET

in England (Brockman, et al. 2015; Kirkup et al. 2010; Ryan, Gospel, and Lewis 2007; Lloyd 2002), how employer engagement underpins such a supply/demand relationship around the VET/E&T needs of high-skill industries remains under-examined.

This article's contribution is thus first to conceptualise employer engagement in the context of the high-skill supply/demand relationship around E&T/VET in England, by exploring how high-skill employers and supply-side institutions engage around a constrained institutional environment and period that remains unaddressed in the literature (Keep, Mayhew, and Payne 2006). By drawing on institutional theory, and in conceptualising employer agency as an institutional phenomenon as (in)formal structural employer engagement arrangements (Abdelnour, Hasselbladh, and Kallinikos 2017; Emirbayer and Mische 1998), this article further explores in the findings, the drivers and barriers surrounding employer engagement (Payne 2008b; Irwin 2008, 66) as agency and influence (Lloyd 2002) within a specific UK high-skill region. Questions are further raised about the findings' relevance in the context of a newly revised VET English institutional environment. In outlining the similarities between previous and future constraints surrounding VET in England, the findings thus provide context around the potential of high-skill employers in meeting their demands surrounding E&T/VET in the future in the discussion section. Such analysis is perhaps particularly needed in line with the recent successful vaccine response to the COVID-19 crisis around a World Class industry that is arguably established around an exclusive relationship between 'employers, industry associations and E&T systems' (Vaughan 2017, 554). Yet here too, commentators have advocated the need to address the constraints that prevent a much-needed employer-led, (i.e. centred around employers' needs) VET approach in England (Brockman, et al. 2018; Kirkup et al. 2010; Keep and Mayhew 2010; Keep, Mayhew, and Payne 2006) and hence this article.

Study framework – conceptualising employer engagement as institutional agency

Institutional theory examines how institutional structures and processes, within and around organisational boundaries, are initiated and actioned because of external pressures (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Giddens 1986; DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Oliver 1991). Institutions are 'regulatory structures, governmental agencies, while institutional constituents' responsible for 'exerting pressure include the state, interest groups and public opinion' (Oliver, 1991:147). Institutions are initiated because of 'shared rules' that are supported by social actors and their activities' and manifest as reproducing normative collective orders and institutional engagement structures around state influence in response to pressures within the external environment (Barley and Tolbert 1997, 96). In the English VET system, this is mirrored in the influence of government (Treasury – employer levy system) and its institutional agencies such as the IfATE which regulate around industry/employer/business-level VET (e.g. National Apprenticeships Service). Since Meyer and Rowan's (1977) seminal paper, much discussion is formulated around institutional structures, the conditions, causes and consequences of institutionalisation within and outside organisational boundaries. To assess such an impact on business, institutionalisation may be seen to feature as 'rule-like, social facts or organized patterns of action that emerge or are embedded in formalised organisational structures, not connected to particular actors or situations' (Zucker 1987, 444). Organisational institutionalisation is embedded in acts and interacting formalised social structures and roles that are generative as new (in) formal institutional elements created around action (Zucker 1987; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Formal structures have symbolic and action-generating characteristics, feature socially shared meanings and serve 'objective' functions, such as communicating information or decision-making between internal/external audiences (Tolbert and Zucker 1996; Meyer and Rowan 1977) such as in this article between employers and government institutions.

Similar arguments are encapsulated in Giddens structuration theory that highlights a duality between structure and human agency as action (Giddens 1986). Here, 'structures are constituted by human agency and yet are the very medium of this constitution' (p. 61). Structures 'present

constraints for human agency but also exhibit enabling' qualities (Giddens 1986, 374). Wider structuralist perspectives indicate that actors are 'victims of circumstance or instruments of history' and so the structures constituted around their action present or are based upon also long-standing constraints such as problems around resource access (Giddens 1986). This analogy perhaps explains the consistently highlighted institutional challenges surrounding the supply/demand relationship around the English VET environment and may be used to unpick further the employer engagement problems between business and the supply side around VET provision in the contexts of high-skill technology-oriented production environments (Streeck 1989; Finegold 2006, 2013).

Structuration theory may be argued to be thus useful in understanding the structures initiated surrounding such environments (Giddens 1986, 1991, 2009). Giddens here positions actors as agents with the knowledge and competency, responsible for organising such structures that are mirrored in the actions that actors engage in. These actions stem from the knowledge that actors possess, which they apply to rationalise, regulate and monitor behaviours and decision-making (e.g. over resources), and which in turn lead to the structural embedment or formalisation of institutional practices.. Giddens claims that other theories ignore this aspect of the practical consciousness of actors, or what actors tacitly know, although indicates that interaction between actors is crucially reliant on rules as techniques or procedures and resources. Structuration theory is also noted for its limitations in ignoring the conditions of action, which this paper uncovers when exploring the institutional employer engagement structures initiated between the supply and demand side around the high-skill E&T/VET needs of business, the employer agency, constraints and drivers. In accounting for such perspectives that suggest that institutional agency is complex, varies depending on influence, is constrained and is enabled, this article addresses the following questions. First, how is employer engagement conceptualised as institutional agency around the E&T/VET supply/demand relationship of high-skill business? Second, what are the employer engagement constraints around such an institutional agency, and third, what future implications can we subsequently draw?

Methodology

This article uses an exploratory inductive single case-study approach and convergent interview methodology involving nineteen policy stakeholders and twenty-one corporate and senior HR managers. Policy stakeholders were recruited using a snowball sampling strategy (Bryman 2008, 185), allowing access to individuals with expert knowledge and experience of the E&T/VET concerns impacting high-skill businesses. These participants worked in government-funded institutions and sector skills agencies such as Sector Skills Councils (SSCs); Regional Development Agencies (RDAs); Business Link (BL) and National Skills Academies (NSAs) and Business Innovation and Skills (BIS), organisations, which during the research (data collection 2012–13), faced restructuring (e.g. SSCs) and closure (e.g. RDAs).

Participants from high-skill businesses included individuals from corporate senior management teams involved in industrial steering and corporate board-level sector strategy committees and senior HR individuals with responsibilities for policy decisions around organisational E&T/VET matters and around business, sector-level or wider needs impacting the English Northwest Bioregion. Sixty emails were sent to partnering large and SME pharmaceutical, bioscience and biotechnology businesses using a Northwest Bio Now cluster directory (2011). Follow-up telephone calls resulted in twenty-one respondents confirming participation from these businesses within a region that is home to international research centres of excellence and collaborations from across and between biomedical, bioscience, medical device and healthcare businesses and research institutions (BioNow, 2010; LSIS, 2010). The region at the time was noted for a wider skills shortfall and weaker infrastructural investments compared to its established high-skill cluster counterparts within the south (www.ons.gov.uk).

gov.uk – Oxford, Cambridge). This justified the need for an exploratory critical single case-study approach (Yin 2009, 47), allowing for rich, in-depth and detailed explorations of participants' experiences around this competitive northwest region (AIM 2005; Amin 2004).

The convergent interview (CI) approach and its consecutive interview data analysis methodology helped in gradually uncovering, layers of rich, detailed and in-depth data as key themes after each interview (Riege and Nair 2004, 75). This allowed the researcher to iteratively explore, (re)evaluate and (re)visit new consensus themes after each interview, lending to a rigorous data analysis approach (Troshani and Rao 2007). Open-ended interview questions generated varied thematic patterns, while open and closed interview probes supported more focused explorations of key and new emerging sub-themes, resulting in an evolving conceptual framework with each completed interview. Themes that appeared in the interview data as participant's social constructions of experience of human agency were initiated because of the 'social actions that underpinned their roles as social actors' within the organisations they worked in, and the subsequent institutional employer engagement structures they interacted with, according to the E&T/VET needs of high-skill businesses (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 970). The institutional agency uncovered was based upon participants' previous experiences and future expectations and so was explored importantly in the context of the constraints around existing interacting and newly emerging and anticipated institutional structures (p. 970). Interview questions were thus established to explore how human agency manifested around the social roles that participants connected with tackling the E&T/VET needs of business, the types of structures surrounding such agency and importantly the employer engagement constraints surrounding the (in)formal institutional structures surrounding such needs. So here, interview questions explored how such an agency was influenced by, for example, 'resource access' issues or hierarchy and 'social position' (Abdelnour, Hasselbladh, and Kallinikos 2017, 1775). The supporting theoretical lens subscribes to Foucault's (1980) notion of the political influence of institutions within a social class system and order that is localised around structures, institutional habits, routines and parameters affiliated with government institutions, agencies and supply-side reform (Hodgson 2006). The interviewee's role was thus to uncover this higher social order's influence in relation to otherwise independent employer engagement institutional structures facilitated between the supply and demand side, their underlying agency and constraints based on participants' social constructions of experience (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2017, 29).

Findings – constrained employer agency and engagement

The study revealed that while engagement between the supply and demand side was largely constrained, policy stakeholders and employers recognised 'individualised' and 'collective', albeit 'progressive' forms of employer agency (Figure 1) and engagement structures (Table 1) around the demand for various types of E&T/VET across the region.

Individualised employer engagement

Policy stakeholder perspectives

Policy stakeholders spoke about priority commitments around a national skills agenda that supported mainly low/intermediate-level jobs across the region, instead of their priority needs around high-skill E&T/VET. SSCs in particular revealed difficulties in supporting a regional emphasis across the NW Biocluster (Payne 2008b) ('... we're not blind to the region ... we're very aware of the clusters within the NW ... it's just that we're obliged to deal with the nation ...'). Arguably while the responsibility of the region alternatively lay with the RDAs at the time, here too, instead of tackling sector-specific E&T, priorities were focused towards supporting investments concerning business economic growth and development over (Keep, Mayhew, and Payne 2006): ('... consultations are broad ... cutting across sectors'). NSA organisations tasked with addressing grass roots training issues highlighted similar issues in focusing on lower-level training through consultancy and sector/

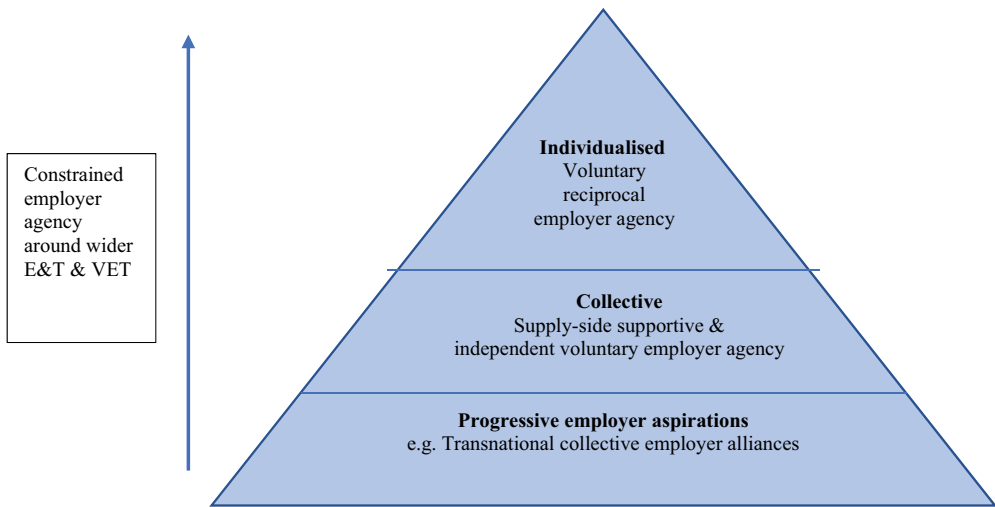


Figure 1. Employer engagement as institutional agency.

Table 1. Supply-side employer engagement.

Employer agency	Employer engagement		
	Involvement (two-way)	Informal (one-way)	Response (two-way)
Individualised	Employer skills diagnostics; training partnerships	Report dissemination; informal visits	Employer feedback – workshops; networking events
Collective	Strategic advisory, councils and committees; Sector Skill Agreement consultations; (sub)sector boards	Websites; newsletters; industry boards, associations; employer surveys	Initiating employer feedback – sector strategy groups; skills alliances; industry conferences

subsector-level training partnerships (‘... Government policy focuses on low-pay work which employers don’t traditionally support ...’). Regardless, there was an acute awareness of the need for a regional emphasis in supporting a E&T high-skill agenda (‘... HE and beyond is where we’ve got to hit to change our economy ...’ SSC).

Since the research and prior VET criticisms (Leitch 2006; Keep, Mayhew, and Payne 2006; Lloyd and Payne 2005), the UK has witnessed a revolution in its support of a broader VET agenda (National Apprenticeship Service) in tackling wider low-/intermediate-level and high-skill issues. This renewed interest underpins an employer-led consultation and employer-provider partnership framework (Keep 2015), although questions may be raised here around whether arguments that raise issue with the historical challenges faced by the supply side of weak employer engagement and further (training) provider issues still apply (non-relevant provision; employer costs – bureaucratic employer levies, training provider concerns – Brockmann and Laurie 2016; Keep 2015; Brockmann, Clarke, and Winch 2015). The collected data confirm this in the notable ‘individual knocking on doors’ culture that policy stakeholders highlighted they adopted in engaging employers, around the fairly substantial on-the-ground resources (social capital) they had access to: ‘... we’re knocking on doors ... we’re making our activities cohesive by reducing the number of knocks ... we’ve got brokers ... talking to businesses regularly about apprenticeships ...’ (SSC); ‘... our regional managers have primary functions in gathering but also forwarding product information to small and large companies ...’ (NSA). For some, this individualised approach caused reputational damage around their E&T initiatives/products (‘we don’t want to be selling products ... it takes away value from our work ...’, SSC), although for others enabled a needs-led employer engagement approach (e.g. skills diagnostics) and individual employer-consultations around newly identified E&T initiatives (Payne 2008a):

'... we engage in consultations ... that's the process ... if they're not willing ... we knock on doors to bring them to the table ... the plant manager qualification involved individual independent consultations with fifty employers ...', (NSA). Initiatives supported by these arrangements that also eventually led to employer consultations included: apprenticeships, bite-sized HE qualifications (HEFCE funding); non-funded industry-wide internships and bespoke qualifications, mandatory training (SSCs, NSAs – NVQs) and solutions around grass roots training (BL, NSAs). These arrays of initiatives were financially supported by policy stakeholders, although also dependent upon a reciprocal employer agency (Figure 1), involving in-kind financial contributions from employers in exchange for representation and board-level influence on national supply-side initiatives (Payne 2008a; BIS 2011; NSA 2009) ('... we are employer-driven ... our Board comprises of employers ... our funding comes from employers ... we wouldn't exist without employers ...', (NSA).

Overall, these findings confirm existing literatures about the weak employer interest in their initiatives, although the highlighted in-kind employer agency underpinned the various (in) formal institutionalised approaches that policy stakeholders adopted to individually connect employers (Payne 2008a,b). Table 1 shows the informational strategies employed largely to disseminate data around government-funded E&T/VET commitments, while employer-response strategies initiated individualised employer feedback on their services. The extensive employer data accumulated by individual policy organisations through independent employer consultations further served as an information resource/data bank, although here too policy stakeholders reflected upon a lack of institutional support and trained staff (Payne 2008a): '... we don't have a huge team ... we have multiple responsibilities ... bringing in core funding, extra business, extra research and projects, developing our business ...' (RDA); '... training is poor ...', (NSA). Questions here may be raised around whether policy stakeholders were sufficiently resourced around meeting the demands of a national agenda or whether they possessed sufficient clout to harness the interest of individual employers.

A key concern was around whether employers were aware of their services: '... there's issues around how to make employers aware of our products and qualifications ...'; '... not all employers understand the productivity and skills relationship and won't engage ...', (SSC). This weak awareness extended to SME businesses (Payne 2008a,b) although prioritising the interests of large employer organisations was a useful influencing strategy towards recruiting SMEs: '... we go after the larger companies ... SMEs come in ones and two's ... but follow ...' (RDA). The weak employer awareness, according to policy stakeholders, also lays in the lack of HR coordination within SMEs, around their supply-side initiatives: '... HR managers, production people, directors, production managers ... one has different conversations depending on who one talks to ...', (SSC); '... the person at the top might think its brilliant but if they haven't told the person at the bottom ... then its difficult ... its about talking to the right person and more than one individual ...' (BL). The further lack of process and HR and management conflict around their initiatives within SMEs challenged access: '... HR hold the purse strings ... we support line-managers and provide advice around our initiatives ... yet a new line-manager halted a contract because they couldn't see the value ...' (NSA). These institutional employer engagement constraints mirror a disconnected employer agency around supply-side initiatives across the region and further perhaps deserve consideration especially in view of the current narrative in England towards supporting a VET agenda that is focused on individualised employer-led VET partnerships.

Employers' perspectives

According to SME and small business employers, however, this disconnected employer agency and otherwise weak reliance on the services of policy stakeholders stemmed from varied institutional business constraints (e.g. management cost/time; weak HRM expertise) (Payne 2008a,b): '... we don't initiate contact ... individuals from SSCs or the skills academy occasionally contact us about concerns ...' (large-SME). Employers further substantiated a weak interest in supply-side E&T/VET largely because of a reliance on independent in-house organisational training systems and

independent autonomous partnerships with training providers that they themselves initiated, whilst industry/professional networks supported access to information on regulated training matters: “... we work with different companies and private providers as the region does not support our skills shortages (large organisation); ‘... we grow our own expertise in-house ... train staff internally ... our colleagues are involved in UK academic centers of excellence ... and professional regulatory bodies ...’ (large-SME). Wider regulatory E&T was managed through organisational management decision structures, extensive quality standards and procedures, and a reliance on private training-provider and consultants: ‘... we work with a small number of partner providers ... our procurement department is involved in partnering with consultants and well-known training providers who build be-spoke programs for us ... provide our graduate training ...’ (large-SMEs).

So here too, we see an individualised, autonomous employer agency, although also evident is again independent engagement with policy stakeholders, where information on sector-wide regional E&T and training provider access matters were addressed through voluntary individual consultations and participation in large-scale data collection: (medium-sized SME – ‘... we’re involved in industry-wide surveys ...’; ‘... we engage in large scale skills gap analyses for the Life Sciences ...’ micro-SME). While this activity served as a useful source of information for employers around the wider E&T initiatives supported by policy stakeholders, of particular concern was the lack of information on solutions for newly identified high-skill concerns around R&D production and manufacturing: ‘... we need skills capabilities around combined predictive and biological sciences ... universities don’t produce people with these skills ... they either produce mathematical or biology skills ...’ (large-SMEs). In response here again, we see an individualised self-initiated employer agency around the E&T demands of small businesses/SME, this time in the form of independent solutions sought through attendance at industry conferences (e.g. organised by CBI, BIS, HE academics): ‘... our quarterly networks bring together industry people, academics, professors ... one chief executive picked up student wanting to develop a business ...’.

Employers were, however, not completely devoid of the services of policy stakeholders as larger employers and SMEs revealed that policy stakeholders (NWUA, SSC) helped towards securing independent local training-provider partnerships around low and semi-skilled technician and manufacturing roles (e.g. packaging biological solutions and drug manufacturing). Individualised employer access to local and workplace-relevant high-skill training provision was, however, again problematic around, for example, advanced-level laboratory technician roles. Therefore, here too, employers revealed a disconnect from policy stakeholders and preferences towards establishing independent and autonomous employer-led training solutions initiated through specialist private training providers: ‘... we work with partner training-providers and consultants ... share our business models values, behaviors and rules, our technical training and job models ... they build bespoke programs and provide graduate and technical training ... some funding is available yet is difficult to access ... it changes rapidly ... and is complex’ (large-SME). While private training partnerships here again were supported by an individualised employer agency which was advantageous in initiating an employer-led approach, this did not detract from the problems of accessing funding, an issue that is perhaps partially resolved around current VET through government grants and the employer-levy system. Regardless, independent private training partnerships seemed the most effective solution for employers around the much-needed employer-led high-skill training provision that they sought, which HE/FE provision was unable to facilitate: ‘... we target universities ... we’ve recently developed a programme ... in setting up a clean room facility ... which didn’t happen because of funding ... our staff do seek specialist partnerships with local universities, and FE colleges ...’ (large employer). These findings are poignant as they raise questions over the current interest in VET (i.e. National Apprenticeships services) around whether employer reassurances are perhaps needed around an existing challenged HE and FE training-provider/employer partnership framework. On a positive note, however, in demonstrating an independent employer agency around

newly emerging high-skill private training-provider partnerships, the findings are an alternative to existing literature studies that otherwise highlight the problem of the stifled training demand in the UK (Keep and Mayhew 2010).

Overall, employers mainly confirmed a voluntary, circumscribed and individualised employer agency around the wider E&T initiatives supported by the supply side and expressed a broader interest in national policy efforts (e.g. STEM agenda), yet only where this underpinned Corporate Social Responsibility targets: '... Governments define policy and the guidelines within which we operate from a corporate social responsibility perspective ...' (SSC). Here, employers received cold calls from policy stakeholders requesting their individual commitment around such initiatives or otherwise received invites seeking their voluntary attendance at bi-annual regional steering committees initiated by policy stakeholders. These involved corporate decisions undertaken by corporate leaders (large R&D capability) or CEOs (SMEs) around policies concerning gender equality, diversity and inclusion involving STEM careers: '... we sponsor schools ... and support industrial placements in science ...' (SSC); 'our CEO is involved in diversity and inclusion regional steering committees in advancing women ...' (RDA). In effect, high-skill businesses tended to not initiate engagement with policy stakeholders yet revealed a voluntary, reciprocal and individualised commitment towards some wider initiatives (Figure 1).

Initiating a collective and progressive employer engagement agency

Policy stakeholder perspectives

Alternatively, policy stakeholders identified a collective employer agency when engaging employers around training regulation matters impacting the region around compliance standards or mandatory technical training requirements linked to the packaging of pharmaceutical products and laboratory manufacturing (R&D) '... our basic drug manufacturing processes compares to global competition, however the training is poor ... the big drug companies are focused on R&D ... yet their training around manufacturing is weak ...' (RDA). Table 1 highlights the various sector-wide institutional strategies adopted by policy stakeholders that mediated collective engagement between employers and local E&T providers. Involvement strategies initiated a collective yet also voluntary employer agency around formalised consultations that were initiated by policy stakeholders on (sub) sector-wide regulated or standardised E&T and were conducted through strategic advisory groups, committees or as part of Sector Skills Agreements. Response strategies initiated collective yet voluntary employer feedback around the services of policy stakeholders mainly through committees involving Strategy groups, Skills Alliance and which businesses, policy stakeholders, and providers attended. Although these institutional arrangements initiated by the supply side brought collectives of employers to the table around various sector wide E&T matters, they were not without problems, in terms of, for example, securing sufficient employer involvement ('... difficult to pin employers in a steering committee or a working advisory group meeting ...' (RDAs). Coupled with the ad hoc and specific nature of the E&T issues, policy stakeholders further highlighted facing difficulty in securing sufficient employer traction around their adoption of E&T, despite the substantial financial employer contributions initiated in supporting their services: '... we have drawn in more than a million pounds from employers ... we've looked at different funding models for smaller employers ... its mixed success in getting as many employers on board ... but it gives them a chance to test our services ... SSCs'). While some E&T needs remained unaddressed, these institutional arrangements and collective employer agency led to the wider employer adoption of various initiatives across the region including around certified leadership development or business and management courses, Level 2 NVQs pertaining to administration and machine-operators roles, and Level 4 NVQs for laboratory technicians. Most notable was the growing SME interest in their expanding VET portfolios surrounding the high-skill context (Keep and Mayhew 2010; Keep, Mayhew, and Payne 2006): '... we're successful in expanding our services ... high-skill sectors are

now adopting repetitive manufacturing to innovative production and processes ... looking for higher-level skills and apprenticeships ... for levels 3 and 4 instead of 2 and 3 ... around process intensification ... new product development new drugs ...' (SSC).

Yet, this renewed commitment did not detract from the somewhat historical problems impacting UK VET and its associated NVQ qualifications (Brockmann and Laurie 2016; Lloyd 2002). According to policy stakeholders, most notable were the structural complexities employers collectively identified, during their strategy consultations and industry sub-sector boards aimed at NVQ provision: 'employers are not well informed about NVQ qualifications ... the structures around qualification are too complicated ... employers don't understand the variety of qualifications ...' (SSC). Where employers collectively expressed interests around VET, funding issues (funding access; business eligibility) and problems with provider access, the much-needed collective employer agency and involvement were restricted during consultations around new NVQ qualifications reforms: '... qualifications reforms are moving ... towards bite-sized, credit-based learning which hasn't come in nationally yet ... allowing staff to learn gradually ... but the issue facing employers is funding ... will it be funded?' ... where are employers supposed to get information on funding? ... it's difficult for employers to find funding ... only some employers look for it who believe training is a valuable asset ... the message doesn't get through ... is funding available ... employers are not aware ...' (SSC). Again, these employer issues are widely acknowledged in the existing apprenticeship literature studies as constraints (Brockmann and Laurie 2016, – i.e. funding access, eligibility and transparency) that limited the employer-led involvement of businesses around new qualifications reforms. So again, these are perhaps particular concerns that require consideration around also the current VET framework that is established on partnership relationships between employers and training providers.

Employer perspectives

Also evident is a collective employer agency amongst businesses in their engagement around E&T/VET, which is dependent/independent of the supply side. This collective employer agency was very much a preferred option for particularly SME businesses, around high-skill issues such as the advanced scientific technical laboratory role and graduate-level and laboratory technician apprenticeship roles and standards (bio-production and manufacturing): '... we need more graduate-level apprenticeships in science-based industries ... more apprenticeship programs for laboratory technician or process apprenticeships ...' (large SME). Here, SMEs were found to favour local employer partnerships that were structured around technician R&D roles which they accessed through the networks of NSAs, in response to the funding and importantly training provider access issues across the region: '... we had technical colleges in Altrincham, in Crewe ... they've disappeared ... our staff need HNCs, a City and Guilds. Our laboratory analysts, technicians need degrees. Twenty years ago we would take on A-level students, send them on HND day-release and then fund degrees on day release – we haven't done that for years ...'; '... SMEs don't need to employ a new apprenticeship every year ... its not viable ... our academy's networks are useful in encouraging employers to establish employer clusters and providing standardised training support on a rotational basis ... to eight or ten apprenticeships' (medium-sized SME). This was an apt solution in tackling the structural challenges their region presented around the lack of accessible and workplace-relevant training providers: '... training-providers are very commercial and financially cash-strapped around new initiatives ... it's difficult to get them to do anything long-term ...' (large employer).

For larger high-skill businesses (e.g. Pharma), the supply side's national skills agenda and its emphasis on low-/intermediate-level jobs across the region were of little consequence, while variations in production strategies further challenged a much needed collective employer engagement and agency: '... our autonomous companies and their organizational designs do not encourage the collective ... they have their own training programs ... making it difficult to connect with the region ...' (large employer). Larger employers thus alternatively instead highlighted preferences of drawing on the support of partnerships established with and between UK and European HE institutions and centres

of excellence around high-skill training provision to counter the problems of accessing local training providers around vital technical training: '... we adopt research collaborations with research institutions from the Northwest ... in supporting post-grads and post-docs ... so there are industrial sponsors ...'; '... our Swedish centers and institutes ... set up programs directed around industry so its not on a regional basis ... its usually with an individual academic center ...' (large organisation). A further reliance on temporary transnational alliances or coalition agreements with research centres of excellence and institutes was thus a potential solution towards tackling the newly recognised global competencies: '... there are colleagues involved in UK academic centers of excellence ... although this is not frequent ... we work in partnership ... in developing educational initiatives ... like the Royal Society of Chemistry ...', large-organisation). These temporary arrangements brought together employers collectively as an effective solution in supporting the design of new competency frameworks around newly established multi-disciplinary job roles around competitive global R&D production capabilities: ('... we're currently looking at skills shortages around mathematical modelling and computer simulations of biological systems ...'; '... we are building skills around predictive sciences and predictive technologies ... universities don't produce these skills ... these people come together within a handful of centres of academic excellence ... Europe has one or two centres ...' (large-organisation). Clearly, here, further understanding is needed around the potential success of these collective employer arrangements, which involved European businesses (e.g. pharma), HE institutions and European academic centres of excellence as their popularity was mirrored in the variety of initiatives that employers further anticipated. These included competency frameworks and career structures linked to specialised R&D job roles (e.g. predictive sciences and emerging technologies) and additional E&T around post-graduate R&D competencies (e.g. mathematical biological modelling). Employers seems quite progressive in their collective agency around initiating sector-wide E&T concerns, unlike suggestions in existing literature that point to a stifled demand (Dobbins and Plows 2017; Keep and Mayhew 2010).

Most notably, this collective agency is further mirrored in the structural social capital (e.g. knowledge, expertise and funding) that these temporary arrangements supported (Figure 1), as reflected also in the senior roles of participants: '... I'm involved in European activities where industry as a whole works together ... with academic groups ... to address E&T needs within the pharmaceutical industry ... individual companies will then access these courses and training options ... I wear the Innovative Medicines Initiative Education and Training hat and lead the European Medicines and training alliance ...'. These alliances, however, supported only the temporary access to the roles, responsibilities and capacities of stakeholders involved in high-skill E&T provision: '... various stakeholders are involved ... from the scientific community ... employers, policy-individuals ... so for the toxicologist role ... we defined our skills-sets ... considered life-long learning ... CPD ... and validated this learning and training ... we bring together stakeholders and put in place the mechanisms for delivering it ...'.

Beyond these arrangements, employers revealed that collective employer consultations initiated by policy stakeholders helped towards tackling shortages in low-skill technical roles (NVQs levels 1&2) and graduate employment in SMEs: '... we are brought together annually in consultations ... aimed at training people from pharmaceutical and chemical processing industries ... within the Northwest the meeting involves SSCs, Development Agencies and Skills Academies ... we meet every three months ... to discuss Government Funding ... NVQs ...' (medium-sized SME). So here again, we see the potential of alternative forms of a collective employer agency in both the collective (SME apprenticeships) and further a progressive employer agency (high-skill alliances) (Figure 1), independent of policy stakeholders as perhaps potential solutions to the demand for high-skill E&T/VET initiated across the region.

Discussion & conclusion

This article's contribution is in providing clarity around the nature of employer engagement (Payne 2008a; Irwin 2008) with policy stakeholders around the wider E&T and VET needs of high-skill business in an English region (Lloyd 2002). This article draws on the idea of institutional employer

agency to explore the institutional engagement structures initiated between employers and the supply side and importantly highlights the constraints and the drivers surrounding these (Abdelnour, Hasselbladh, and Kallinikos 2017; Emirbayer and Mische 1998). The findings uncover three types of employer agencies and engagement initiated between policy stakeholders and business (Figure 1). First, a voluntary individualised yet constrained employer influence underpins the E&T needs of employers and the efforts of policy stakeholders in engaging employers around E&T priorities, based upon a reciprocal economic employer relationship (e.g. financial contributions). The second corresponds to a collective, albeit constrained employer agency around standardised E&T employer requirements, whilst a progressive approach is established around newly emerging R&D advanced technical competencies and high-skill VET business needs, independent of policy stakeholders. Importantly, the findings confirm existing literature around the institutional employer engagement constraints faced by employers and policy stakeholders around the E&T and VET needs of business (Payne 2008a,b). Set against the backdrop of these constraints, the article's contributions are thus threefold. Through the highlighted case, it first conceptualises the nature of employer engagement between employers and policy stakeholders in Figure 1, while Table 1 exemplifies the different employer engagement structures initiated by policy stakeholders around the E&T/VET needs of business during a period that remains unaddressed in the literature. Second, this article positions its findings in highlighting the employer engagement constraints within the context of underexamined high-skill businesses, whilst third, it questions the implications for future VET.

The first employer engagement typology in the findings subscribes to an individualised and voluntary employer agency, initiated through one-to-one employer engagement structures (Table 1). Here, both employers and policy stakeholders confirmed that the broader nation-wide employer engagement constraints mentioned in existing literature studies also impacted the high-skill context. So, despite the substantial financial contribution from employers, policy stakeholders noted a weak employer interest in their nation-wide initiatives, instead of a preferred sector-specific or regional emphasis around E&T/VET priorities (Keep, Mayhew, and Payne 2006). Employers relayed concerns about a narrow focus, circumscribed approach adopted by policy stakeholders around E&T/VET and the lack of regional funding and training provider access. Arguably, the current VET interest (National Apprenticeship Services) in England perhaps has inherited these very constraints, raising questions around whether its employer levy system and often questionably changing funding support through the ESFA and MCAs really are viable solutions to the disparities in employer support that previous government measures with similar VET measures have initiated (Brockmann and Laurie 2016). What is evident, however, is that such institutional constraints are perhaps likely around the current English VET system, in consideration of the additional VET costs and training access issues faced by SMEs and small businesses around specific E&T needs. In this article's case, such trends were further met with a reliance on independent private training providers where still problems around training access and qualifications predominated, issues that are perhaps ultimately also relevant for cash-strapped SMEs currently.

High-skill SMEs were, however, not devoid of the services of policy stakeholders (e.g. NSAs), in the individualised employer consultations (voluntary employer agency backed by financial contributions) which surfaced around bespoke technical and graduate training requirements that, according to employers, local FE and HE, could not support. So, while the current employer levy framework is perhaps an employer solution towards tackling the wider historical employer funding issues (regional access; transparency) so prevalent in the UK, and which employers in the case also faced around vital technical competencies (e.g. high-skill laboratory technician roles), this does not detract from the questions raised in previous literature on VET about the 'additional' employer costs incurred around facilitating VET industry-wide (Brockmann and Laurie 2016; Keep 2015; Brockmann, Clarke, and Winch 2015).

Also as historically, questions remain over the likely impact of the supply-side constraints (e.g. weak HE/FE provision), also highlighted in the case on SME and small businesses, in line with the expected growing activity around technology supported R&D production across the region (Glenn 2018). Certainly, in the case study, such issues exacerbated the already weak SME interest in the supply side (Payne 2008a,b; Dobbins and Plows 2017), while further business resource issues (trained staff; aligned internal processes), also likely to influence the current VET environment, were prevalent in constraining the necessary individualised employer-led agency needed for E&T/VET requirements (Gleeson and Keep 2004). Are such problems still prevalent around the current high-skill VET institutional environment that boosts predictions of unparalleled growth in biological centres of excellence, spin-off activity and technological advancement (Glenn 2018, – AI; robotics; synthetic biology)? How is this demand likely to be met when VET is reliant on a much-challenged HE sector, where individualised HE sector partnerships are the way forward?

Similar trends are also apparent in the second employer engagement typology (Figure 1) initiated by policy stakeholders, which makes use of a collective employer agency (Table 1 – e.g. strategy committees). Here, employer aspirations around VET are further underpinned by a collective employer agency independent of the supply side. Again, employer concerns about structural constraints in accessing regional funding and E&T/VET provision hinder the formalised employer engagement arrangements in Table 1. Regardless, these arrangements led to various successful E&T solutions across the region, although again more relevant to the current VET environment was the weak employer/SME interest in NVQ reforms initiated by policy stakeholders. Again, questions here may be raised around whether these structural constraints around VET provision and access have been alleviated around more current VET provision (e.g. complex NVQ qualifications and VET funding structures; lacking workplace relevant NVQ provision – Kirkup et al. 2010; Ryan, Gospel, and Lewis 2007). Consequently, is the highlighted collective employer agency around localised SME partnerships, around VET, a viable solution to the highlighted, albeit historical structural problems in the case? To facilitate access to a wider and welcomed high-skill VET offering, what support do SMEs, like the ones in the case, have access to in future, in view of the consistent challenges around training provider issues (accessibility, resource constraints), the consequences of which have been all too clear in the declining uptake and completion of VET historically (Green et al. 2015). While the current study's collective employer agency initiated by policy stakeholders produced *some* employer benefits in accessing E&T solutions and provision across the region, perhaps further research is needed in understanding the employer aspirations raised in the case towards SME employer partnerships around VET (Glenn 2018). Similar questions may be raised around understanding the potential of the transnational arrangements highlighted in the case in their potential as high-skill VET structures and systems initiated by employers (Keep and Mayhew 2010).

To conclude, based upon a snapshot analysis, this article confirms the wider picture of a constrained employer engagement around the supply-demand relationship surrounding high-skill E&T/VET, raising cause for concern around the current interest in VET in England (Durazzi 2018; Payne 2008a; Lloyd 2002). Perhaps one way of reducing the highlighted structural constraints is through the collective and progressive employer agency (Figure 1) demonstrated in the case, although initial questions here need addressing about the implications of such a transition for wider stakeholders (employees and unions) (Keep and Mayhew 2010; Finegold 2006).

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