

CASE STUDY

Designing Employer Engagement from Day One

Caspian School of Academics (CSA)

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Context

Caspian School of Academics (CSA) is a newly established higher education institution, created to respond to regional skills priorities, social mobility ambitions, and evolving employer needs in the Thames Gateway region and the London boroughs that border it.

With no legacy systems or inherited practices in place, CSA made a deliberate choice from the outset. Employer engagement would not be added later as provision scaled. It would be designed into the institution's foundations from day one.

Working with UNIVOLV partners Ltd, CSA treated employer engagement as a core institutional capability. The aim was to shape how the institution thinks, governs, and makes decisions over time.

The Challenge

Designing employer engagement for a brand-new institution creates a particular kind of pressure. Critical decisions have to be made early, often in parallel, with consequences that shape institutional behaviour for years.

There was no existing framework to adapt. Everything had to be built from first principles while strategy, curriculum, governance, and growth planning were all progressing at the same time.

Without deliberate design, the risks were real:

- Fragmented or inconsistent employer relationships
- Engagement led by individuals rather than embedded in the institution
- Reactive rather than strategic decision-making
- Misalignment with OfS expectations, Local Skills Improvement Plans, and regional employer needs

Early design decisions create long-term path dependency. Get the architecture wrong at the start and you spend years trying to fix culture instead of building on it.

The challenge was to build coherence from the outset without locking the institution into patterns it could not later adapt.

The Approach

We treated this as a design exercise, not a programme of activity. Employer engagement was approached as an institutional capability to build deliberately. Not a set of relationships to accumulate over time.

The work focused on three things:

- Strategic clarity. Clarifying the purpose and role of employer engagement in relation to CSA's mission, values, and emerging educational model.
- Embedding. Integrating employer engagement into curriculum design, governance, the student experience, and institutional decision-making.
- Enablement. Establishing the roles, behaviours, structures, and measurement frameworks that would support implementation and accountability over time.

DESIGN → EMBED → ENABLE

A design-led sequence that created clarity first, embedded principles second, and enabled sustainable delivery over time.

Attention was given to roles, expectations, and shared behaviours across leaders, staff, and partners. This reduced reliance on individual relationships and informal practice.

The approach also produced a tiered employer partnership framework. This ranged from initial transactional engagement through to deep, co-owned partnerships involving long-term sponsorship, joint funding bids, and employer involvement in outreach and inclusion. Three domains of collaboration were defined: Education (curriculum co-design, placements), Research (joint projects, knowledge exchange), and Valorisation (translating knowledge into societal and economic value).

What the Work Enabled

The design work created conditions for confident decision-making and sustainable delivery. The emphasis was on clarity, alignment, and coherence. Foundations that endure as CSA grows.

Strategic clarity

CSA developed a shared understanding of what employer engagement is for, what it covers, and how it connects to the institution's mission and values.

Embedded governance

Ownership, oversight, and accountability were built into the design from the start. That supports future assurance and gives regulators confidence.

Institutional alignment

Leaders, staff, and partners share a common frame of reference. Employer engagement informs

Scalability by design

The approach was built to evolve. CSA can grow provision and partnerships

behaviour and decision-making across the institution, not just within one team.

without diluting values or strategic intent.

Alongside these foundations, the strategy established specific five-year targets. These included full representation of LSIP priority sectors and a 95% employer retention rate, providing a clear accountability framework for governors, regulators, and partners.

Why This Matters

For new institutions, early design decisions become embedded fast. A provisional choice at inception can shape culture, governance, and ways of working for years.

Employer engagement is particularly vulnerable. Without deliberate design it becomes fragmented, personality-led, or peripheral to the decisions that actually matter.

By investing early in a structured, design-led approach, CSA built clarity and coherence at a formative stage. Employer engagement is now positioned as a core institutional capability. It is integral to how CSA thinks, governs, and develops over time. That gives it credibility with partners, regulators, and the communities it serves.

Looking Ahead

The foundations are in place. As CSA develops, they provide a clear framework for phased implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement.

When employer engagement is positioned as part of how the institution thinks, governs, and operates, not bolted on, it can evolve as provision grows and priorities shift.

“Ambitious yet grounded. A clear roadmap for progression and impact across all stakeholder groups.”

Mandy Hobart, Principal, Caspian School of Academics

To discuss how this kind of work might apply to your institution, contact andrea.ward@univolvpartners.com