

**RESPONSE BY THE NORTH WEST BUSINESS LEADERSHIP TEAM
(‘NWBLT’) TO THE LAMBERT REVIEW ON LINKS BETWEEN BUSINESS
AND HIGHER EDUCATION**

The North West Business Leadership Team (‘NWBLT’) warmly welcomes the opportunity to submit views for the Lambert Review, on behalf of major businesses in North West England. As can be seen from the attached membership list, NWBLT brings together senior decision-makers from major businesses throughout the North West region and, for the reasons set out in our attached response to the White Paper on the Future of Higher Education, we attach the utmost importance to higher education and to the quality and effectiveness of links between that sector and the business community.

We have recently carried out a survey of the views of our members for the purposes of this submission. It is apparent from this survey that the strength and quality of our members’ relationships with the HEI sector vary considerably. Generally our members report strong and successful links with HE in this region, and there are a number of outstanding examples of best practice in respect of particular companies and universities. For example AstraZeneca, BAE SYSTEMS, BNFL, Manchester Airport, Pilkington, ScottishPower, Unilever and United Utilities all report strong relationships in key areas of research and training, with substantial benefits being derived from long-term research alliances and strategic partnerships with HEI’s in the North West region and elsewhere. Such benefits include improved production processes, problem-solving, environmental impact management, and the recruitment or secondment of scientific expertise. However there is clearly scope for further

developing these links and for brokering new or improved working relationships in certain instances: a number of our members identify a need for greater ongoing commitment between the respective companies and institutions, so as to increase the quality of the relationships.

Several of our member companies provide substantial financial support for particular areas of University research within the North West or elsewhere in the UK, and generally report a high-level of satisfaction with the quality of research undertaken. A number of our members have however commented upon the relative lack of corresponding public sector investment in research in the North West.

NWBLT has worked for some years to help broker quality relationships between our region's major businesses and the higher education sector. We meet regularly for discussions on both strategic and operational issues with Vice-Chancellors and other senior management of all the North West's HE institutions. We also enjoy an excellent relationship with the North West Universities Association and, together with NWUA and other key partners, play a leading role in stimulating innovative enterprise and spreading best practice through the annual North West Innovative Enterprise Awards. Recently we have contributed to Manchester's "Knowledge Capital" initiative which promises to further strengthen the region's business and academic links. We have strongly supported the unification of Manchester University and UMIST, which alongside the North West's other excellent research institutions, will undoubtedly offer increasingly competitive academic and research resources for our world-class industrial companies. At the same time we are also concerned to ensure that the collaborative and complementary capabilities of our other Universities continue to be maintained and developed.

Over the past five years we have been extremely pleased with the overall growth in collaboration between universities in the North West, bringing with it a much greater sense of regional partnership. The impact of this collaboration has generally been of great benefit to the business community, both in relation to the range and relevance of teaching courses provided and in the quality of much of the research support.

Through the relevant graduate offices, students at North West universities now receive regular information on career and work placement opportunities at some of the leading companies in the region. However this flow of information does still sometimes depend upon the initiative and persistence of the relevant companies, whilst in the research field several of our members still report difficulty in identifying the most appropriate available university expertise in some subject areas. As a region, we believe the North West would benefit considerably from more readily available published information on existing business/university collaborative work.

Some of our members comment upon the varied levels of user-friendliness amongst HE institutions. One of our members refers to the 'different language' spoken by academics. Another comments on an occasional lack of commercialism and reality, and failure to understand the output required by business. Others report difficulty in achieving on-time delivery of collaborative projects for which tight deadlines are required. There is also a perceived danger that companies which invest in long-term university research are too often seen as a benefactor rather than a recipient of advice or service.

Whilst generally reporting excellent relationships with the relevant University research departments, a number of our members do also report difficulties in relation

to the allocation of Intellectual Property Rights. One major company refers to the “unrealistic expectations” encountered with HEI’s which seek significant funding from industry but wish to retain the IPR themselves. We do however recognise that there can be two sides to the story in these matters, and on the whole consider that relationships with HEI’s here in the North West are such that the benefits to business, industry, and the regional economy substantially outweigh the difficulties.

We have suggested, in our accompanying response to the White Paper, four particular measures which we believe would fundamentally improve and enhance the contribution of higher education to national and regional competitiveness and well-being. Each of these measures would similarly enhance the quality and effectiveness of links between business and higher education. A well-developed and growing relationship with the business community would also considerably increase the potential for universities to earn additional income from the private sector, thus providing a useful third source of funding alongside the contributions of Government and students.

The 2003 North West Regional Economic Strategy rightly attaches considerable importance to the roles of both business and academia in exploiting the growth potential of a number of significant business sectors. For example the revised Economic Strategy lists as one of its key activities: - ‘Identify the requirements for, and develop business incubation facilities to encourage business start-ups and spin-outs from Universities, other research and Higher Education institutions and large companies’.

NWBLT member companies are engaged in a variety of collaborative initiatives with North West universities to help stimulate additional high-quality business incubation facilities in our region. Again, we have a number of very notable strengths but also a number of gaps. For example, in common with other English regions, we lack the kind of provision of early stage “proof of concept” funding which is readily available in Scotland. There is now ample evidence from experience in Scotland that this is a model which should be replicated in regions such as the North West.

Innovation is a vital element of long-term business development. We have noted the progress currently being made by the Innovation Review and strongly welcome the importance being attached by Government to innovation as the key to long-term sustainable growth. In the North West, as a direct result of the Byers and Smith Reviews, we have the North West Science Council, led by Sir Tom McKillop, Group Chief Executive of AstraZeneca. The work of this regional Science Council is now regularly informed by a group of senior research directors from NWBLT member companies, including not only AstraZeneca itself but also BNFL, BAE SYSTEMS, Fujitsu Services (formerly ICL), Pilkington and Unilever. The willingness of these companies to share their foresight thinking, on a collective basis with the region’s universities and the NWDA, promises to add real value to the work of the North West Science Council.

The North West Business Leadership Team can therefore report considerable progress in the development of links between business and the universities in the North West, but also a number of outstanding issues and areas for possible improvement. As the representatives of leading businesses across the North West, we reiterate the paramount importance of investing in the strongest possible links between the

business and HE sectors if we are to see real progress in improving our region's overall economic competitiveness. We would be very willing to arrange a meeting with representatives of the Lambert Review team during these next few months if this would be welcomed.

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