

Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration

Response by Birkbeck, University of London

Birkbeck's mission is unique – it is the only institution in London which specialises in the provision of part-time higher education to adults, the majority of whom remain in employment while completing their studies.

The College employs around 300 academic staff and has around 15,000 students. Currently around 7% of Birkbeck students are sponsored by their employer, and we intend to increase the number of sponsored students through responding to the training needs of key sectors of London's workforce.

Strategy and structure for interaction with business

Through HEROBC and HEIF funding the College has set up a Business Relations Unit to form a single point of contact for businesses. The Unit has been situated in the External Relations Department with a focus on promotion of study opportunities at the College as continuing professional development. Members of the Business Relations Unit each have responsibility for a workforce sector and undertake research into staff development needs in that sector to inform future course provision at Birkbeck.

The Business Relations Unit is also setting up discussion groups for academic staff with invited speakers from business or government to discuss topics such as Teaching Company Scheme, CASE partnerships or exploitation of IP.

The Research Grants and Contracts Office handles all contracts, licensing of IP, industry-sponsored studentships and spin-outs, and works closely with UCL.

Birkbeck has 3 Business Fellows (one each in the Schools of Computer Science & Information Systems, Crystallography, and Biological & Chemical Sciences), each funded for 2 days per month through London Technology Network. LTN helps them to map their School's potential services to business and offers training in IP issues.

The College plans to appoint a Development Manager to raise funding from corporate partners as well as alumni.

The College is looking into setting up a central database that can be accessed by Business Relations Unit, Research Grants and Contracts Office, and Alumni and Events Team, so that all contacts with businesses can be recorded and shared.

Provision of CPD

Accredited courses

The vast majority of Birkbeck's courses are academic courses leading to Certificate, Diploma, Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate awards. Organisations will pay for staff to take part-time academic courses as CPD where this matches closely their professional practice. At Birkbeck these are primarily taught courses in:

- Computer Science (UG and PG)
- Economics (UG and PG)
- Law (UG)
- Management (Cert/Dip, UG and PG)
- Organisational Psychology (PG)
- Politics (PG)
- Psychology (Cert and PG)

In the area of Management, for example, Birkbeck offers study opportunities at all levels from short courses through to PhD, and in the current year has 200 students studying Management sponsored by their employers. This consists of 5 taking short courses, 114 taking modules of Certificate or Diploma courses, 4 taking the Foundation Degree, 7 taking an Undergraduate Degree, and 28 taking a Postgraduate Degree. 42 students taking Postgraduate Degrees in Occupational Psychology or Organizational Behaviour are sponsored by their employers.

Birkbeck currently has four Foundation Degrees – in Management, IT, Science, and Media and Business Applications – and is looking into developing others which fit closely with workforce development needs in London. These Foundation Degrees, in line with Birkbeck's mission, are offered on a part-time evening basis to enable working adults to study. This means that many students do not want or are not in a position to take up work placements.

Bespoke training

Birkbeck's School of Economics, Mathematics and Statistics has provided tailor-made training to meet the needs of staff at HM Treasury. Birkbeck's Professor David Begg says the Treasury staff received a bespoke course that was "the intellectual equivalent to a Swiss-army knife – an easy-to-understand and immensely useful tool that empowers employees to tackle new situations without being intimidated. They also gained the ability to interrogate their in-house economic experts more usefully and went away with a better overall grasp of how apparently unrelated things fit together."

Building confidence was a key component of the Treasury's course, which was run as three separate three-day modules at two-week intervals. Topics included markets in action, consumer choice, information problems, risk and uncertainty, reading the Financial Times, monopoly, game theory and strategic interaction, long-run growth and regulatory problems. Delivery of the course content was by presentation, group work, review sessions, and talks by Treasury economists emphasising how the course content fits into everyday practical work in the office. The Birkbeck approach resulted in the endorsement of the highest Treasury officials, who rightly view staff development as a core Treasury value.

To highlight the importance of relevant educational grounding of its staff, the Treasury has attached economics proficiency certificates to all posts since 1995. Birkbeck and the London Business School share the contract to accredit Treasury staff at levels 1, 2, and 3 of proficiency, thereby enabling them to apply for promotion.

Birkbeck's School of Economics, Mathematics and Statistics has also provided bespoke training for staff at the Governmental Department for International Development (DFID), HM Customs and Excise and the Bank of England.

Future challenges and developments

Increasing CPD provision

There is a demand for skills-based training provided on a short course, workshop or bespoke course basis. Developing this kind of provision would need to be set in the broader context of the College's mission, its reputation and the development of academic careers. The administrative structures needed to market and manage full-cost courses are different to those existing for accredited courses.

Communicating with business

Marketing materials need to be developed which communicate to businesses, particularly SMEs, the opportunities to engage with the College – either through sponsoring staff to study, undertaking joint research or making use of services offered.

Making contact with intermediaries

Birkbeck hopes to work more closely with intermediaries such as the LDA, Business Link and relevant Sector Skills Councils. The organisational structures of these bodies differs significantly from that of an HEI and it can be difficult to identify who to contact.

Undertaking research for business

There is a need for research evaluative bodies to encourage and give credit for participation in research for business. Collaborative research makes higher demands on academic resources than funded research, so there must be clear incentives to give time over to working with businesses.