

Response to Lambert Review from Northumbria University

1 Best Practice in Business-University Collaboration

- Effective links are dependent upon an integrated and proactive mechanism, which operates on a three tier basis: School, University and regional inter-university level.
- Many Schools have industrial liaison boards, primarily to ensure that the teaching portfolio continues to meet business needs and to engage business in curriculum development. Knowledge transfer and research links are useful additional benefits. Newly-created posts of Associate Deans for Enterprise take a strategic lead in each School.
- Northumbria Commercial Enterprises (NCE) was one of the earliest University-wide companies for industrial liaison to be created in the HE sector. It is no longer incorporated and now has a broader remit, acting as the formal channel for managing the business interface. Training, consultancy, and TCS are handled through this unit.
- NCE also houses the institutional node of Knowledge House – the regional mechanism for managing business links (especially to SMEs), under the auspices of Universities for the NE. Northumbria has consistently been one of the major deliverers of contracts within the HE consortium via this model.
- One aspect of NCE's work, which has been good practice for many years, is having an institutional policy for consultancy, with financial rewards apportioned between the individual, the School and the University according to an agreed model. In return, NCE is able to provide indemnity insurance and a range of project management services.
- The Business Innovations Committee ensures strategic cohesion in handling such business interactions, from an internal and external perspective.
- Regular liaison with business associations has also been crucial – this is maintained at institutional level and via Universities for the NE with organisations such as the NE Chamber of Commerce and relevant parts of the RDA.
- A particular strong model for business interaction is through the Sector Skills Council – e-skills UK. Northumbria formed a relationship several years ago with e-skills NTO, as it then was called, and carried out joint projects on developing best practice in work placements. This led to the NTO selecting the University to pilot the implementation of the HE element of its national strategy and coincided with Northumbria emerging as lead partner for the New Technology Institute (NTI) for Tyne & Wear and Northumberland. This is a consortium of all 10 colleges and universities in this area, together with 18 companies and business support organisations, comprising multinationals and small specialist SMEs. The emphasis is on creating a single channel for dialogue with FE/HE with the objective of creating new types of learning products and services, which are more flexible and responsive to employer needs. Simply creating more student places in ICTs is not sufficient.
- On a broader front, a major strength of Northumbria has been work-related learning, including participation in the *Learning through Work* – the negotiated learning platform offered by Ufi/Learn Direct. Following extensive market research with regional employers, Northumbria pioneered the creation of Lifelong Learning Awards, flexible awards of 60 credit points at any HE level, in partnership with other HEIs in the region. These are tailored for specific sectors of employers or special interest groups eg. elite athletes for coaching. They can be designed from different components such as accreditation of prior learning, university modules, company modules, a work-based project and a compulsory module on managing your own learning.
- One aspect of work-related learning which has been at leading edge of good practice is for company-specific courses eg. MSc in Professional IT Practice for Procter & Gamble. This incorporates many of the elements of the Lifelong Learning Awards. The University is now creating a University-wide mechanism for managing and quality assuring such courses – known as corporate awards.

2 Barriers to Strengthening University-Business Relationships

- In terms of internal infrastructure within the Northumbria and Universities for the NE, the main constraint is capacity, rather than organisation. Funding from HEFCE via HEREOBC and HEIF has provided some invaluable core-funding for such activity, but it is still on a very small scale and is short-term – with all the problems of recruitment and retention of highly skilled, professional staff. Substantial funds are available from the RDA and EU structural funds for delivering projects with business, but these funds do not build broader institutional capacity, as they are highly focused on challenging outputs in terms of high level company support and not on management and co-ordination.
- Staff turnover is a major barrier to university-business interactions. Good relationships take years to build up, often starting from small development projects or work placements, and leading to complex consortium research projects or TCS schemes. Turnover is more of a problem in businesses than in HE, with regular job rotation as well as turnover itself. This can often delay or sometimes stifle the development of long term relationships – which depend upon people knowing and trusting one and other.
- Turnover is a problem in HE due to fixed term contracts, but universities have managed to minimise that risk by sharing the knowledge between professionals in the University and the region (eg. CUPID staff development project). Such use of knowledge management in the context of HE links is rare in business and change in personnel can have a big impact. Of course, it can work the other way, and new staff joining companies might bring them the appropriate mindset and possibly previous experience and good practice of working with universities.
- Research by Northumbria University and others has shown that availability of time is a major constraint to reach-out work. A major piece of work in 2001 funded by HEROBC showed that there was a high proportion of staff wanting to pursue external links at Northumbria, but had little flexibility in their timetable to do so, due to commitments in teaching, research and, increasingly, administration. The University is appraising its HR policies to try and address this issue and reach-out work is now seen as equally valuable in terms of promotion – and new dedicated posts created, such as associate Deans for Enterprise. However, there is much work to be done in making optimum use of staff time to carry out their various duties for the benefit of themselves, their Schools and the University as a whole. The current review of use of time allocated for Research and Scholarly Activity (RSA) is one such example.

3 Skill Needs of Employers

- One issue that we would like to comment on is the articulation of skill needs by employers in the context of curriculum development. Although some employers do take an active role through course committees, the main vehicle for making views known publicly is via associations such as Chamber of Commerce and the CBI. Sometimes, feedback from such bodies is not made by individuals with direct knowledge of current good practice that their companies are currently engaged with.
- Apart from in-depth research projects, more constructive model for finding out needs of employers is through working with the Sector Skills Council. They can mediate the two-way flow of information between HE and employers very effectively. If both sides better understand their needs and constraints, they can work together to find pragmatic solutions. Early work with the NTI and e-skills UK is very promising in this regard and has full backing from the RDA.