Northampton Waterside Enterprise Zone
Skills Strategy – App 2b

Report 3: Generating business-HE linkages
case study

Northampton Borough Council
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1 Generating business-HE linkages case study

1.1 Introduction

Headline messages

Challenges

- Ensuring that the opportunities afforded by the NWEZ are distributed across the people and communities within Northampton.
- Addressing higher level technical, supervisory, management and leadership skills gaps and shortages.
- Support the significant local ‘knowledge economy’.
- Improving the engagement of sectors and occupations that do not usually engage with HE.
- Improving the quality, effectiveness and responsiveness of HE provision to business needs.
- Meet the employment and skills needs of the increased forecast demand for higher level skills and jobs.

A potential solution

- Improving graduate employability skills: ensure that graduates have the business and employability skills to go with their higher level skills so they can contribute to the business more quickly and add greater value over time.
- Engaging with micro businesses: provide responsive and flexible higher level skills provision to very small businesses who typically do not engage in HE.

Benefits delivered

- Increasing the relationship between HEIs and businesses, especially SMEs.
- Improving the understanding of both SMEs and students/graduates of each other’s opportunities.
- Broadening the understanding and development of employability skills across HEIs.
- Improving the added value of graduates and appropriateness of HE provision.
- Creating more business oriented and flexible learning opportunities for micro businesses.

Key lessons and building blocks

- Requires significant resources – to engage with businesses and develop the infrastructure for businesses.
- Smaller businesses will require incentives – costs of higher level skills and engaging with HEIs are expensive for small businesses and they will require financial incentives initially.
- Involving employers in design and delivery – initiatives need to involve employers in the design and delivery, be it in designing training programmes or employability skills support to students.
- Developing employability skills is necessary to attract students – with much greater financial commitments required of students getting a job, and the support HEIs bring to that, will be an important selling point.
- Whole organisation approaches – business focused activities need to be aligned with the strategic objectives of HEIs. They also need to be embedded across the whole organisation, and not just in particular departments or types of employability support.
1.2 Case study rationale

The rationale for the case study approach is outlined in Section 1.1 of the Executive Summary and Report 1: National and local skills context. The purpose for focusing on linkages between business and HE was:

- Matching HE course provision with employers existing and pipeline skills demands;
- Increasing graduate retention;
- Targets a range of sectors (therefore fits with EZ aim to encourage the growth of a number of sectors);
- Offers synergy with local initiatives: University of Northampton Employability initiative and schemes being delivered by other Universities / Colleges across the SEMLEP area, link to local employability and progression opportunities;
- The development of a proactive growth oriented approach to skills training rather than a reactive deficit model;
- To enable education providers to work with existing and prospective businesses to ensure future educational and skills-based training is appropriate to employers’ needs and that the young people have the skill sets to enhance their employability;
- To develop innovative processes that combine the best research methodologies with the practicalities of running businesses and growing the economy;
- To promote innovation and business growth connected to the NWEZ, creating a pool of trained people in the region ready for enhancing existing and future employment offers.
- Explore how skills' training is developed in the future for the NWEZ building up a support network and a collective skills base for current and future employers to utilise.

1.3 Why should businesses and higher education collaborate?

A principle aim and aspiration for the skills agenda is to increase the quantity, quality and relevance of higher level skills in the UK economy, thus giving UK plc a competitive edge over its main competitors. ‘You can’t beat Beijing on price’ but you can on innovation, and ‘workers doing jobs better and doing better jobs’.

Underpinning such approaches is the better utilisation of skills. One aspect of this is greater collaboration and communication between the development of skills by providers (both further and higher education institutions), and employers who will eventually utilise them. More effective higher education (HE) -business collaboration has been a policy goal for a number of years, recently reiterated by Professor Wilson in his recent review of business-university collaboration:

‘The economic and social prosperity of the UK depends upon a healthy knowledge-based economy. In our globally competitive economic environment, never before has there been a greater need for a talented, enterprising workforce, for constant innovation in product and service development, for a thriving culture of entrepreneurship, for dynamic leading-edge scientific and technological development and for world-class research that attracts investment.’

1.4 Graduate employability skills

In particular, improved graduate employability is a key outcome of collaboration and is a means to ensure a positive and effective transition for graduates from studying at university to working in a commercial business. The CBI defines ‘employability skills’ as:

A set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy.
This encompasses skills of self-management, team working, business and customer awareness, problem solving and literacy, application of numeracy, application of information technology, an underpinning positive “can-do” attitude and entrepreneurship (or an innovative approach), therefore encompassing both hard and soft skills.

While there has been a history of university collaboration with businesses and of supplying graduates with the skills needed by employers, the Leitch Review of Skills in 2006 emphasised a move from broad graduate employability to more specific workforce skills, for instance those promoted through innovative programmes of teaching and learning; in-company programmes, courses designed by industry and placements, internships and sandwich years as part of student degrees. As such employer engagement is part of academic culture for many higher education institutions through ‘whole-curriculum-based approaches’ and growth in enterprise education and entrepreneurship more broadly.

Ensuring that graduates possess skills of employability is, therefore, not a problem for higher education institutions alone – it is also a challenge for businesses.

1.5 Collaborative programmes to improve graduate employability

Businesses have varying requirements of higher education (including universities, colleges, private training providers, in-house training and professional bodies). As such, there exists a broad array of approaches to delivering employability approaches through HEI and business collaboration.

Improving employability skills through collaboration is consistently a part of funding interventions, emphasising its perceived importance by government. Research has found that work experience can significantly impact on a student’s employability, success rates during their studies and early career destinations. For instance, Aston University states that over one-third of their students on placements across degree courses are offered graduate jobs by their placement employer, regardless of their course of study - furthermore, 81% of Kingston University placement students got a first of 2:1 in the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Computer in 2008, compared to just 34% of non-placement students.

Swansea University and GO Wales

Swansea University is providing a range of support across the whole university to increase the employability skills of its students.

Since the implementation of student loans and increase in tuition fees, students have realised that they need as much support as possible in getting well paid employment when they graduate. HEIs also believe that they need to support students in this aim, in part, as a selling point of the university.

In addition to working with students and employers, staff also support academic colleagues in their attempts to improve the employability skills of their students.

Swansea works with a range of large businesses and SMEs. Larger businesses tend to have specific requirements (for example, STEM requirements) whereas the requirements of SMEs tend to be broader and more immediate. They require graduates to be multi-skilled, think laterally and add value to the business in a shorter timescale.

GO Wales

GO Wales is a national programme funded through ESF Convergence funds. It provides a range of support including:

- **Work placements.** SMEs can recruit graduates and students for a 6-10 week work placement. Company work placements are advertised on a website which students can search for. The website provides a job description, essential and desirable skills
required, and details of pay (work placement wages are supported up to £1,000 by GO Wales).

- **Work tasters.** Work tasters assist undergraduates to gain quality work experience. University students are matched with local organisations for periods of experience lasting between 3 – 10 days or 17 – 70 hours.

Swansea employs a work placement co-ordinator, and runs an employability award based on the City and Guilds Professional Development Award. The Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) enables students and graduates to build up credits to the awards from placements, tasters and other activities, such as, volunteering.

Engaging with SMEs to provide placements and tasters is a challenge. The university uses a variety of approaches including word of mouth, governing body contacts’ the local chamber etc. A good route to employers are graduates who have gone on to set up their own business or are managers within existing businesses. Being able to provide a financial incentive to help with wage costs also helps. Students are also encouraged to do their own research to identify placements.

An important driver for work placements and tasters is working with SMEs. In part this reflects the make-up of Swansea’s local economy, but it also makes SMEs aware of the potential of HE graduates, and makes HE students aware of the employment opportunities in SMEs.

Swansea University, like all HEIs, are seeking to embed employability skills within students in order to increase their employment chances and options when they graduate. In addition to GO Wales, the university encourages students to use their extracurricular activities, including volunteering, to develop and then display their employability skills e.g. team working, customer service, taking responsibility.

The university also works with departments to identify the generic employability skills graduates will require. For example, he university career’s service worked with the Criminology Department to engage with youth justice organisations to look at the practical aspects of working within this sector. Classes were arranged with careers officers co-delivering the sessions. Students are then encouraged to use the opportunities for placements, tasters and volunteering within the university to further develop these practical skills.

**Success factors**

- Easy process to engage with GO Wales and the universities support employers;
- Includes a range of mechanisms including volunteering and longer term placements;
- Covers all departments, undergraduates, post graduates and graduates;
- Works across all types of employers, especially SMEs.

### 1.6 Challenges and barriers to employability and how they may be overcome

#### 1.6.1 The complexity of ‘employability’

All job roles require generic employability skills – with some also requiring more technical skills provided by a graduate’s studies. However while higher education needs to offer the workplace with work-ready graduates and encourage innovative thinking, employers also play a role in training graduates further as part of a longer process of learning and development. The means through which graduates have gained employability skills is changing and will continue to do so, in a shift away from a traditional student under 24 years of age and studying full time – to one where students increasingly working part-time alongside studies, studying alongside a full time job, entering education as a mature student, beginning studies with a foundation course or studying for a vocational course.

A number of factors exist that may inhibit or reduce the effectiveness of collaboration between higher education and businesses – particularly in regards to the definition and delivery of skills provision. This includes:

- **Strategic fit for the HEI and its partners:** employer engagement needs to be aligned with and supportive to an HEI’s direction of development;
Finding partners and establishing a relationship: a central contact point at an education institution and within a business; commitment from partners to spend time exploring employer needs and meeting them; positive relationships between individuals;

Designing and delivering an appropriate learning package: the development of complementary learning experiences which does not have to be entirely offered by the training provider; identifying the preferences and abilities of learners and developing provision based on this;

Developing, sustaining and leading the partnership: clear roles between partners; buy in from key partners, structures to ensure continuity particularly where an individual may be leaving; ongoing leadership and recognition of different requirements of leadership;

Staff resourcing and capability: engagement in areas where staff are experts as a unique selling point; responsiveness to employer requirements and careful consideration of the resourcing of courses;

Culture and systems supportive of collaboration: cross-cultural support from an intermediary if required, recognition and acknowledgement of providers/individuals who actively engage with employers; flexible internal systems that adapt; and,

Funding and investment: appreciation of the true cost of employer engagement; a sustainable income stream.

In part, these barriers and challenges are backed up by perceptions that higher education, particularly ‘traditional’ universities, are more focused on optimising research output through the transfer of knowledge and applied research, rather than providing higher skills for those already in work and the involvement of employers in improving provision for staff. While establishing links and relationships with employers has long been viewed important – it has been argued that it forms the ‘third stream’ or mission which is carried out in addition to research and teaching, rather than alongside itxv.

Teesside University is an example of an HEI with an employer-led agenda and where barriers to collaboration have been reduced through effective employer management. The University’s Vice Chancellor identifies that the key success factors to this positive engagement are the possession of the qualities that would be required of a successful business, namely customer focus, responsiveness and commitment to deliver quality on time and at an agreed pricexvi. A further tool which supports their employer engagement strategy is the Client Relationship Management (CRM) System xvii:

Client Relationship Management at Teesside University

Teesside University’s CRM system has helped to improve employer engagement activity, particularly through being embedded across the institution. The system is used to increase transparency in managing employer relationships and maximise efficiency and communication - as well as ensuring that rather than employers / individuals in businesses being contacts of specific university individuals, they are clients of the University as a whole.

The system was developed through funding from the Strategic Development Fund in 2009. A grant of £5.13m was used to embed the employer-led ethos including through the development of the CRM system and the appointment of seven Account Managers to support ‘long-term responsive relationships with employers’.

The system also ensures that interaction with employers is of a high quality – for instance, through informed marketing campaigns providing detail by the type, size, involvement and location of employers, information can be tailored to the business recipient to maximise impact.

The university has previously won awards, including from the Times Higher Education magazine, in regards to its work with businesses in the region – and in particular, the Business School’s Foundation Degree in Leadership and Management (in partnership with the North East Chamber of Commerce, NECC).

Success factors

- Centralised management system for employers regardless of sector or university
department within which contact established;
- Facilitates systematic and tailored communication channels with employer contacts;
- Supported by account managers in key sectors to manage and sustain contact.

1.6.2 Barriers to effective work experience

A study of employer perceptions of graduate employability published in 2011 found that placements, internships and work experiences were particularly effective modes to enhance graduate employability, regardless of the size of business or sector\textsuperscript{xviii}. A third of companies fill graduate vacancies with those graduates that have already had experience within their company either through an internship or work experience placement\textsuperscript{xix}, emphasising the importance that experience can play in raising employability or increasing employment opportunities.

However, whilst they are broadly important - the duration of placements was of paramount importance to their effectiveness. For instance, placements that were 6 months or longer were viewed as more effective to acquire the full benefits of work experience. As such, this meant that sandwich placements and work during holidays from study are particularly effective for students to gain skills that will improve their employability.

While internships also provide advantages to employers, they also lead to costs, particularly when involving supervision by senior staff. The size of business may further impact on willingness to engage and the effectiveness of collaboration – with links more prevalent in larger entities than SMEs, as larger employers have more resources to develop and sustain links with education providers, than smaller employers. The STEM Engagement Centre at the University of Reading has produced a ‘A toolkit for setting up credit-bearing placements to improve the employability skills of STEM students’\textsuperscript{xx}. The toolkit emphasises means of effectively engaging with employers, including the need to emphasise benefits to engagement in language that they will understand. These benefits are three fold – including publicity and marketing opportunities, opportunities to enhance the workforce and corporate social responsibility. However it also emphasises the need to ensure that employers are realistic as to their expectations of students.

The study of employer perceptions also found that employers felt higher education institutions’ willingness to engage with employers varied by department and faculty – as did individuals’ willingness to engage. This could potentially limit engagement opportunities, despite employers wishing to support graduates.

The University of Kent uses an employability points scheme to improve engagement with extra-curricular activity as a means to develop transferrable employability skills, using work experience, placements, internships and training as ‘prizes’ for those that have worked towards developing such skills. This provides employers with the opportunity to provide experience to students that have proved they are dedicated and willing to work hard, and thus provides employers with an expectation that their skills may be more developed than those students who have not earned enough points to win a reward:

**Work experience as a reward for broader involvement in extra-curricular activity at the University of Kent\textsuperscript{xxi}**

At the University of Kent, the **Employability Points Scheme**\textsuperscript{xxii} has been established to reward students that choose to engage in extra-curricular activity related to work (such as working part-time, learning new languages, engaging in enterprise activities or active membership of clubs/ societies). The points can be used to apply for further employability enhancing rewards such as work experience, job shadowing or internships, in addition to training opportunities. Prizes are employment related and sponsored by employers and help students to overcome a situation whereby they have a degree but no work experience by supporting the development of employability skills and providing contacts with businesses that sometimes lead to sustained employment.

The scheme has engaged both students and companies and delivered over 275 work experience related rewards in 2012. In its 2010-2011 pilot, over 1,000 students and 30 companies were engaged...
(and 70 students rewarded) – increasing to 2,000 students and 86 companies in the 2011-2012 year with 282 student rewards offered. Corporate sponsors include both local companies and governing bodies including the County Council and large companies such as Coca Cola and Tesco.

**Employer engagement**

Employers are engaged at various stages of the process. Once the idea had been drafted by the university, the team brought in a group of employers to test the idea on them and gain feedback. Following this, a smaller and varied group (by sector, size, engagement with students / work experience) was brought together to discuss the skills they viewed as important from new recruits. Each activity that students could choose to engage with through extra-curricular activity was therefore weighted according to its perceived importance to an employer and the types of skills developed – for instance part time work was positively weighted (i.e. was worth more points) than a one off training opportunity.

The university’s engagement strategy was similar to that followed for business development – via direct calling, making contacts with the supply chain of existing clients, networking sessions and inviting employers to visit the campus.

**Barriers and challenges**

- Similar challenges to setting up a business in terms of getting commitment from the University and then initially engaging employers and students. Employed a part time student to support the development of the pilot – providing them with work experience – and also supporting the team to develop initial contacts with employers and students and advertise the scheme;
- Employers were initially unable to ‘put their finger’ on what they were looking for. They knew they wanted motivated individuals who could demonstrate commitment – but were unable to demonstrate exactly what this meant in reality. It took time and hard work from the team to identify the skills that were valued and to establish a weighted criteria to activities through which skills could be developed;
- Once initial students and employers were engaged, the success and engagement from the university student body was visualised – and subsequently more employers engaged;
- Once the scheme had gained popularity (i.e. over 500 students), a manual IT system for monitoring was not suitable for the data requirements (time consuming process of manual input). The university is currently in process of designing a bespoke and automated system to streamline data entry / processes. While they could not have illustrated the need for a system in the scheme’s earlier days, it would have been a beneficial system to save time.

**Success factors**

- Easy process to engage with - rewards student motivation and commitment to activities outside of their studies where employability skills can be developed. Many students may already be involved in activities – but also encourages students to be competitive and motivated;
- No barriers to entry – anyone can engage regardless of academic degree / discipline;
- Mirrors the world of work – with competitive element and drive required from individuals to gain points and ultimately ‘win’ opportunities;
- Provides real-life opportunities for work and training with well known brands and smaller companies;
- Variety of employers engaged (sector, size) to offer students with broad opportunities for experience regardless of their study discipline.
- The University has received interest in the scheme from the EU and UK – at HEI and university level – and from local authorities in regards to sixth form colleges. They are considering potential opportunities to commercialise the scheme and enable its adoption into different learning environments. They were also nominated for the 2012
1.7 Driving HE links with businesses

Employer engagement with higher education is driven by two primary factors:

- **Increasing the supply of graduates / specific skills.** To overcome shortfalls in the workforces’ skills for an individual employer or a sector more broadly. This may be to improve the graduate recruitment pool, or to establish better relationships with students whilst at university through teaching, placements etc.;

- **Improving productivity or ways of working.** Where employers seek to develop a range of higher skills, introduce new skills as a result of changes in an industry or a changing business environment / to move into new markets.

The main benefits for business of engaging with higher education are the ability to improve the supply of graduates they receive, enhance productivity and to develop new and/or innovative ways of working.

Increasingly employers are looking to higher education to establish long term relationships, and vice versa. For instance, research suggests that employers are actively engaging as partners in learning provision through provision of work experience opportunities and support to teaching. Further business benefits to engaging with higher education institutions, include access to a pool of potential employees, support with recruitment and knowledge transfer opportunities. Employers can also gain from receiving bespoke training support and the accreditation of learning.

A study undertaken in 2012 found that 63% of employers had developed links with universities in varied activities from sandwich year placements to a role in shaping or influencing degree programmes. Businesses also choose to provide practice projects that help students to appreciate the real-world relevance of their course, partnered with universities for research and innovation development, including KTPs. Internships were identified as particularly useful at boosting employability – with two thirds of firms offering such internships operating in engineering, hi-tech/IT and science sectors, and over half in professional services – compared to 47% of all businesses. As a result STEM subjects and skills were viewed as most important.

All HEIs have good links with a range of large employers. Increasingly HEIs are developing their links with SMEs and micro businesses. This creates a greater challenge as engaging with smaller businesses is generally more of a challenge, SMEs tend not to have a dedicated HR function to manage these activities, and SMEs on the whole tend to invest in training and higher level skills.

### Adapting to work with SMEs - PP4SD

Professional Practice for Sustainable Development (PP4SD UK) is a national organisation aimed at embedding sustainable development practices within business and other organisations. They have developed a range of training courses, including dedicated materials for the land based, financial services and retail sectors.

PP4SD UK tend to work with large business and organisations and were keen to adapt their provision to meet the needs of SMEs.

In association with Swansea University and Lantra (the Sector Skills Council for the environmental and land-based sector), PP4SD UK secured funding from the European Social Fund to: “...create sets of training materials to enable owners and managers of [SMEs] to understand the basic principles of sustainable development and to give them some business-planning tools to help deal with challenges to the sustainability of their business”.

The training materials are primarily aimed at four industry sectors: Environmental Management, Aquaculture, Fisheries Management and Agricultural Manufacturing. These sectors were chosen...
because they predominantly include micro and SMEs with low levels of training.

Whilst the training materials were developed for these four sectors, both the approach and the materials are based on processes that can be applied to any sector and any business.

As technical content is increasingly freely available on the internet\(^{xxxvii}\), so the approach is much more

Key elements of the approach are:

- Developing course content in association with businesses;
- Backcasting – starting from where you want the business to end up and, from there, working out how best to achieve the goal;
- The use of a range of tools (such as mind mapping) in order to develop critical thinking skills so that people can independently apply what they have learnt;
- The use of participatory exercises that bring people from different businesses together so they can share their experiences and complement their knowledge;
- Create business ownership of what sustainable development means to them, and the benefits and barriers to achieving this.

The learning materials – available in Welsh and English, in paper, on-line and CD format – were based on existing materials, but developed with the target sectors and businesses. However, the main focus of the course was in getting people to think for themselves, and in collaboration with other learners. Therefore a number of events were organised in order to bring people together so they could network, interact and discuss ideas with each other and cross-fertilise from their different approaches and experiences.

Unfortunately, seminars were poorly attended due to the weather, the rurality of Wales and business commitments. PP4SD therefore had to run more 1-2-1 sessions with learners than originally planned.

The materials were developed in consultation with businesses in the four sectors. Could you say a bit more about how this was done, how many businesses, how did they contribute.

The big hook to engaging with businesses was being able to deliver the provision for free. Many of the businesses are family run businesses and have limited time for training, as well as being run on tight margins. However, as business people they are interested in developing their business and, in land based sectors, sustainable development is important to achieving this.

PP4SD has successfully delivered the course to 200 learners from 100 businesses. The course is now delivered through Lantra’s accredited trainers.

1.8 Summary: key learning points for Northampton

Key learning points from the case study review of HE and business engagement:

- **Increasing employability skills is a key aim of all HEIs**: there are a large number of HEIs that could have been selected, as increasing the employability skills of students and graduates is a priority for HEIs, as they seek to compete for students and demonstrate their progression into appropriate employment.

- **Whole institution approaches are essential**: it is not sufficient to focus on placements or tasters. Approaches to improving employability skills need to embedded throughout the institutions.

- **Extensive employer support is needed**: engaging and supporting employers, especially SMEs, is requires a lot of resources and a consistent approach that is in-line with the HEI’s strategic objectives. Using previous graduates as a method of engagement is an additional approach universities have found to be effective.
Management of knowledge will become increasingly important: developing higher level skills will become less about transferring knowledge and more about knowledge management. Increasingly resources are available on the internet, so employers, especially small businesses will need support in identifying the most appropriate knowledge for their business. This approach also creates flexible approaches which also business people and employees to customise course materials and undertake training when they want to.

Footnotes and references

3 BIS (2012) Following up the Wilson Review of Business-University collaboration: Next steps for universities, business and Government June 2012
7 BIS (2012) ibid
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9 http://www.cihe.co.uk/category/skills/
10 Aston University (2012) Placement years - The Aston Advantage http://www1.aston.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/placements/
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16 University Alliance (2012) A commitment to business engagement http://www.unialliance.ac.uk/site/2012/10/12/business-engagement/
17 Teesside University (?) Leading, Governing and Managing Enterprising Universities. Case Study: Account management infrastructure and the Client Relationship Management System
20 STEM Engagement Centre, School of Mathematics & Physical Sciences, University of Reading ‘A toolkit for setting up credit-bearing placements to improve the employability skills of STEM students’
21 Interview with Business Engagement Lead at University of Kent, 15/01/13.
http://www.kent.ac.uk/employabilitypoints/

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Bolder et al (2009) ibid

Bolder et al (2009) ibid


Especially since the development of on-line US HE websites such as coursera; edX; UDACITY.