

Effects of Business Development and Knowledge Transfer on institutional culture

Key Words

Collaboration with business, Knowledge Management, Organisational change

The lessons of change

This case study represents a reflection on an attempt to change the culture of an institution by making it more outward looking by exploring possibilities and capitalising on opportunities arising from knowledge transfer and business development. The following issues have emerged:

- Academics get an intellectual buzz out of applying their knowledge in a challenging real work setting.
- Making space for people to try new things is crucial when you are trying to effect change.
- Success breeds success – disseminate and adapt models for your own purpose and needs.
- Bringing somebody in from the industry who knows what industry needs and goes out and finds out a bit more for you and sells the expertise of the institution can help.
- Resource allocation is absolutely crucial - if you really want to effect change you've got to be able to direct resources in the way of that change.

Influences

Third leg activities make an important and growing contribution to the University experience. There are a number of reasons for this:

- The availability of opportunities just outside our door are stimulating and powerful drivers for change.
- Tightening budgets are another driver for expanding third leg activities. Examples from abroad (especially the USA) abound – many Universities are relying on their entrepreneurial culture to bring in funding.
- Employers, as stakeholders and consumers of education, have an increasing influence in what Universities offer to satisfy the skills needed in the economy.

A recent merger between two institutions had provided the opportunity not only to apply best practice from one institution to the other, but to decide on how the new institution would benefit from a common approach to business development and knowledge transfer.

Responsiveness to establishing what businesses want out of Universities is one of the very essences of what makes universities the institutions they are. Becoming more responsive to business needs is a powerful trigger for change that can affect the curriculum, methods of delivery, and assessment.

Decision-making

Developing a knowledge transfer strategy within the context of business development, and applying a common approach as to how we transfer the knowledge out into companies, the

community and society and how we benefit from a two-way knowledge exchange is at the very heart of the decision-making stage.

The strategy we chose was to help the interface function develop to demonstrate results. Although the business development sector managers are related to the central Business Development Services, they are working for particular departments. That's how we can work without the obvious instrumental and top-down approach to changing the culture when it comes to knowledge transfer - in effect we're not telling anybody what to do. To achieve this, we embedded them in departments and decided against having a big central business development function. They report to their HOD and I make it my role to make sure the HODs are on board with what we are trying to do, and how it relates to the institutional strategic plan.

Changing the perceptions of individuals is one thing, but the next big thing is getting the infrastructure of the university to support the knowledge transfer initiative through the HR and financial systems to facilitate the tracking of bids and proposals. We had two options open to us - to get the systems sorted out first (which would have delayed us a year), or get something going and then make changes to the system. For us at the moment, particularly with the merger, there are so many other HR and financial issues to get sorted so getting HR and finance systems sorted for this kind of work is not top of the agenda. When the structure is in place, we envisage the efficiency of the knowledge transfer and business development to improve. This is a small part, but it is key to how we do things in the future. At the same time, we realise that there are more important things that need to be dealt with first.

Enabling

Our strategy for income generation is one of the outcomes of our interface work. What we are developing now across two universities is a coherent knowledge-transfer strategy. In a way, it's a combination of how we see the future from the centre, but we realise that it can only be achieved in this large university by involving people from all levels and capitalising on their ideas and expertise. For example, we sent round the latest HEIF bid to everybody and welcomed ideas of what people would like to do, and do well - we've got all these merged departments with new ideas coming out.

It's a tricky balance whether knowledge transfer and business development are centrally driven or embedded in the departments, where the main drivers come from. I'd like to think it comes from everywhere and everyone in the institution - it's more about facilitating change. Some departments have achieved stunning change, and it is the role of the central core function to disseminate and duplicate success.

We have many models we're not stuck with one. Different models suit different departments. For example, 'hands on', manufacturing departments like polymers are very engaged in knowledge transfer and business development, because of the nature of what they do. Other departments, like Business Studies are rather slow to follow their example, nevertheless they still need to strike a balance between the pure academic side (writing papers, teaching, research), and the academic-entrepreneurial values we would like them to adopt.

One community of practice that we set is a networking system we call the 'Business Development Sector Managers network' - it comprises of all the sector managers, employed under one particular scheme as well as others, who do similar roles already in the university. They hold meetings every five to six weeks, a training programme has been set up to help them with knowledge of the university, but also to introduce them to writing bids, winning contracts, marketing, consultancy etc. Apart from the formal training they've got the chance to network and to share experiences. We have seen the benefits of changing through groups rather than individuals doing things on their own. Teaming people up and having a group look at issues was the basis of setting up the Business Sectors managers group.

Disseminating good practice throughout the institution gets people excited about the proposed changes. Departments doing applied research projects bringing in £300 - 400,000 of funding

are considered pro-active. Academics contribute to it by sharing their experiences of getting an intellectual buzz out of applying their knowledge in a challenging real work setting.

The infra-structure is important, but even without it in place, we started achieving cultural change – it's that initial step trying to make sufficient headroom and space for people to try new things – that enables creativity.

Achieving change

We set out to achieve change by developing the university-business interface, and applying and modifying successful experiences to different departments (depending on the readiness and enthusiasm for change), achieving buy in and celebrating success.

Broadly we did the following:

- Establish a core support department looking at the infrastructure (development funding officer, innovation and enterprise support unit).
- Establish business development sector managers in departments.
- Brought-in people from industries relevant to our institution.
- Allow different models to develop to meet different needs. For example, we set up a Financial Services 'Think Tank' because financial services is a sector which is dealt with by several departments. We brought in an expert from business in order to validate the ideas and proposals of how we were to address the needs of the sector. As an outcome of the Think Tank, we are now working on three projects and it also made it possible for people from different departments to work together.

Success affects the culture of the institution too – the belief that we can replicate success boosts morale, and confidence. We also get the income coming in, which helps to refuel the whole thing.

The body language has changed dramatically. People are now much keener to get involved. Once you get people engaged, you can then start to move along through the transition. Another way of effecting the culture is through the example set by the sector managers. They have all got particular targets, which are monitored by their Head and by Enterprise and Relations, that's working and success is contagious.

Leading

Part of being a leader, at whatever level, is communicating what you want done in a way that the message is clearly understood. If buy-in is not achieved, you're in dead trouble - if academics say 'We don't want to know about these new values, we are pure academics, and applied research is not of interest to us', then there are many ways in which they can obstruct the change. However, it's not that difficult to get them on board if you've got a good case and there are benefits for them from the change; support the case with early success (if available) and stories of success in other institutions, give them space to explore your ideas.

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