

2015-4

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Recommended Citation

Sheridan, I. & Fallon, D. (2015). An Exploration of a Higher Education Institution's Response to the Need for Enhanced Engagement with Enterprise. *Higher Education in Transformation Conference, Dublin, Ireland, 2015*, pp.349-357.

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Funder: Tu4D

An exploration of a higher education institution's response to the need for enhanced engagement with enterprise

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Abstract

In Irish higher education, there is strong awareness of the potential for, and of, collaboration between higher education, enterprise and communities to contribute to economic renewal and social innovation but this is accompanied by a recognition that 'higher education institutions could be more dynamic and coherent in their approach to collaboration' (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p. 75). This view is echoed by Healy, et al., (2014, p. 6) who assert that ... 'despite the resurgence in business-university collaboration, research reports consistently find that cooperation practices are highly fragmented and uncoordinated'. The role of an engaged, entrepreneurial university is to act as a co-creator of knowledge, informed by, and in collaboration with, external organisations, and to ensure that graduates emerge with the academic excellence, practitioner knowledge and entrepreneurial skills and capabilities which ensure that they are well-placed to identify or create employment opportunities for themselves and to maintain employability. The entrepreneurial orientation of the institution and its graduates, the application of research and innovation toward challenges in society and the prioritisation of output measures such as patent applications, spinoffs and job creation are important elements in ensuring that universities optimise their contribution to society. Guerrero, et al., (2012) emphasise the importance of the entrepreneurial university as incubator to support the translation of ideas and knowledge into valuable and measurable economic initiatives as well as the importance of partnerships with society and industry in informing and supporting the development of knowledge-based entrepreneurship in higher education. Responding to these challenges and building on the outputs and outcomes of the Roadmap for Employment-Academic Partnership project (REAP, 2009), Cork Institute of Technology has established the CIT Extended Campus in order to join up and maximize the benefits of an already actively-engaged institution so that interactions are sought and stimulated, and business intelligence is collected to support the organisation to act entrepreneurially and to build better-informed, broader, mutually beneficial relationships.

Keywords: Enterprise engagement, Entrepreneurial University, Customer relationship management

Background

The role of higher education within economies and societies is the subject of much discussion. As the mission of the university continues to evolve in response to economic and social imperatives, universities are no longer considered to be dedicated teaching and research institutions; they are now also viewed as potential engines of the knowledge economy (Vorley & Nelles, 2008) and drivers of economic development with a role in both the generation and application of knowledge. In considering this changing role, Shattock, (2014) suggests that higher education is currently undergoing a fundamental shift in its character and a major transition in its relationship with state and society. This time of transition presents both challenges and opportunities. Jongbloed, et al., (2008) assert that emerging knowledge-based societies place an onus on Universities to carefully consider their roles and their relationships with their various stakeholders. Considering these relationships and the various stakeholder groups is further complicated by the fact that many universities receive considerable Government funds. Most university

mission statements will make reference to teaching, learning, research and engagement or service to communities. The development of the concept of the 'third mission' of universities to sit alongside the teaching and research missions has been described by Laredo, (2007) as somewhat ambiguous. Jongbloed, et al., (2008) consider this mission to broadly include all activities that are not within the traditional teaching and research remit but agree that it is difficult to define.

Academics and policymakers have long made reference to higher education's third mission, yet it remains an ethereal component of what higher education actually does. Jongbloed et al. (2008: 312)

Other commentators when considering university-industry collaboration tend to refer to a much more narrowly scoped set of activities mainly comprising technology transfer and commercialisation of research (Berman, 2008).

The OECD, (2007) considers the regional engagement role of higher education more broadly, including knowledge creation through research and technology transfer, knowledge transfer through education and human resources development, and cultural and community development, which can, among other things, create the conditions in which innovation thrives. Policy responses which had been initially concerned with building opportunities for interactions between higher education institutions and enterprises for the purposes of enhancing technology transfer are now broadening to include consideration of a more diverse range of possibilities for engagement within the wider social, economic and cultural context (OECD 2007). However, in most higher education organisation structures these activities are supported through distinct and separate parts of the institution.

In Ireland, as elsewhere, higher education institutions are increasingly expected to support regional economic development through knowledge generation and exchange in collaboration with enterprise and industry. The changing landscape of higher education in Ireland and elsewhere, as outlined in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) presents challenges and opportunities. While the drivers for enhanced engagement and responsiveness to local and regional needs are at the forefront of most policy development in education, the practicalities of how this might be achieved or indeed the exploration of the diverse nature of 'enterprise' in various regions and the resulting implications for engagement are rarely considered.

In many geographies, small and medium industries form the backbone of regional economies and present best opportunities for employment and export growth. While it is understood that working with higher education learning and research expertise can contribute to competitiveness and success for small enterprises, the reality is that many enterprises experience barriers to these partnerships (Collier, et al., 2011). Barriers relating to cultural differences, inaccessibility, resources and funding availabilities have been reported. Dadameah & Costello (2011) report that SMEs lack awareness of what higher education has to offer and lack clarity on who to contact to establish links. Anecdotally, most higher education institutions will report that the experience

of interaction with larger multi-national corporations is very different from that with smaller enterprises. While the nature of the enterprise varies substantially the types of engagement interactions activities that can be considered as university-business interactions is also broad and varied.

Types of engagement interactions

The range of activities that can be considered as university-business interactions is broad and varied. In exploring the form that this type of engagement activity can take, some commentators focus on the science-based discovery and the development of new enterprises or the bringing of new products to market and measure quantifiable indicators such as spin-outs, licences and patents. This may have resulted in a concentration of effort in the realm of university business cooperation on those aspects which resulted in 'hard' outcomes such as spin-offs licences and patents (Healy, et al., 2014). Other commentators include the provision of a workforce with relevant skills into the regional labour market as an important element of university-enterprise interaction, while others will focus more on the community-based interactions including service learning and volunteering. In developing a view of the potential partnership interactions to be explored and developed through the REAP project consortium, the team considered the range of experiences of the higher education members and drafted a partnership continuum which saw the possibility of academic-enterprise interactions ranging from an initial mutual awareness to longer-term strategic partnerships. More recently, eight types of cooperation were identified in a report on University-Business Cooperation namely:

- Collaboration in R&D
- Mobility of Academics
- Mobility of Students
- Commercialisation of R&D results
- Curriculum development and delivery
- Lifelong Learning
- Entrepreneurship
- Governance

(European Commission, 2011)

Through tracking of the nature of interactions sought by external organisations over a number of years, and an analysis of the types of interactions experienced in practice, this range of potential interactions is further refined by the authors into three main categories or groupings proposed as follows:

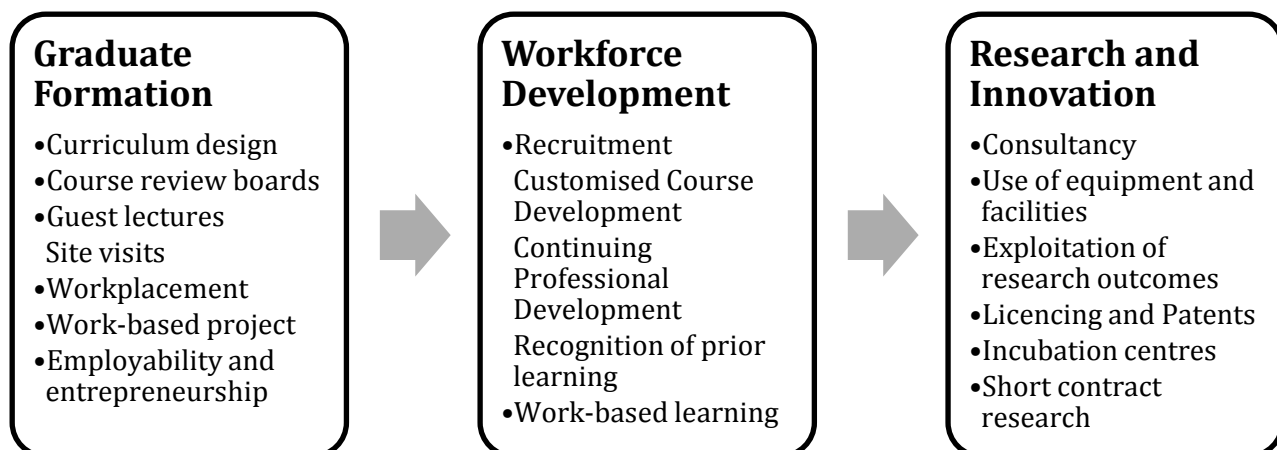


Figure 3 Types of interactions

These are diverse activities which tend to involve a broad spectrum of staff within a higher education institution. As can be inferred from the activity categories suggested above the units of a typical University involved in these interactions might include:

- Academic departments, schools and faculties,
- Careers offices
- Research units and centres
- Academic affairs and academic quality units
- Adult learning and continuing education units
- Technology transfer and commercialisation offices
- Alumni offices
- Buildings and estates offices
- Incubation centres
- Workplacement or cooperative education offices

While there is strong awareness of the potential for, and of, collaboration between higher education, enterprise and communities to contribute to economic renewal and social innovation this is often difficult to achieve, as the higher education institution can present a fragmented interface for the external organisation. Worse, the interface often comprises a confusing array of academic disciplines and acronyms representing research units and centres. For an external perspective it may appear that one's problem or opportunity statement needs to fit neatly into a particular academic discipline or field.

There is a recognition that 'higher education institutions could be more dynamic and coherent in their approach to collaboration' (Department of Education and Skills, 2011: 75). This view is echoed by Healy et al., (2014:6)

who assert that ... 'despite the resurgence in business-university collaboration, research reports consistently find that cooperation practices are highly fragmented and uncoordinated, particularly when it comes to the educational offer.' This fragmentation can result in lack of consistency and coherence in developing relationships and interactions with enterprise.

Enhancing Engagement in Practice

Working closely with community and enterprise partners has always been an important part of Cork Institute of Technology's mission. This has included: ensuring that the curriculum is relevant and current for local regional and national employers, working in partnership with industry experts to develop applied research solutions and supporting new and exploring and responding to emerging workforce reskilling and upskilling needs. Despite having longstanding relationships with external organisations and employers many of the interactions were conducted as separate, distinct activities with little overview of the totality of engagement interactions across the institution. Anecdotally, this situation led to Heads of Academic Departments passing each other in the car park of local multinational companies – neither knowing what the other one was doing there. This disconnected nature of the activity also meant that when one particular academic department or unit of the institution had a successful interaction with an enterprise organization, the knowledge was often lost to the organization as a whole and not used to build a broader strategic relationship or contribute to organizational learning or structures to stimulate or support more engagement.

Between 2006 and 2014 Cork Institute of Technology had an opportunity to contribute to the development of practice in higher education engagement with external enterprises and organizations through a nationally funded initiative. Under a competitive bid process through the Strategic Innovation Fund of the Higher Education Authority, CIT successfully proposed a project which would see a number of higher education institutions, both universities and institutes of technology, work together to seek to establish a collective view of the breadth of interactions possible and to develop practices, processes and policies that would optimize the interaction for both the higher education and the enterprise partner. This project, which was led by CIT, entitled Roadmap for Employment-Academic Partnership or (REAP), contributed to a considerable furthering of the discourse on academic-enterprise relations in Ireland and has resulted in a number of useful guidelines for practice as well as an improved understanding of what can be achieved through partnership and the commitments required for successful partnerships to be developed and maintained.

Responding to this reality and seeking to become an Entrepreneurial University by changing the way we interact with, and are viewed by, enterprise partners, internal changes have been implemented to seek to join up and maximize the benefits of an already actively-engaged institution. Ensuring that the institution does not just teach entrepreneurship or support entrepreneurs but collects and uses business intelligence to, itself, act entrepreneurially.

This objective of the restructuring was to:

- Make it easier for external organizations to engage in mutually beneficial interactions with CIT academics and researchers
- Develop a clear view of the extent and depth of existing and desirable engagement interactions to feed into institutional strategy and decision-making
- Stimulate more interactions and measurably support regional economic development
- Ensure that the variety of interactions with companies are collated and built on to develop broader supportive long-term mutually beneficial partnerships

The CIT Extended Campus was developed and launched as an interface to support interactions with all of the various parts of the institution. CIT Extended Campus model built directly on the strategic importance of engagement for CIT, the knowledge, experiences and expertise gained through the leadership of the REAP project and an exploration of practice internationally. The role of the Extended Campus is to facilitate initial needs analysis and consultation sessions for external organisations. Following this initial phase the external organisation is introduced to the appropriate internal unit(s). At all stages in the interactions a customer relationship management system supports the collation of appropriate information and the compilation of information on queries and interactions provides a rich source of business intelligence for the strategic management of the institution. An indication of a typical process flow is provided below (Figure 4).

Supporting the interface activity a customer relationship management approach has been adopted. The CRM system allows the collation of information and the generation of reports. The types of information held in the CRM include:

Table 1 CRM: Main Record Types

Main Record Types	Description	Types of information held		
Accounts	External organisations	Sector	Size	Address
Contacts	Individuals records	Linked to account	Title/Role	Related internal contacts / Activities
Leads	Queries from organisations/individuals	Related account/contact	Type of activity sought	Internal owner(s)
Engagements	Interactions	Ongoing/Closed	Related actions communication	Notes/ attachments

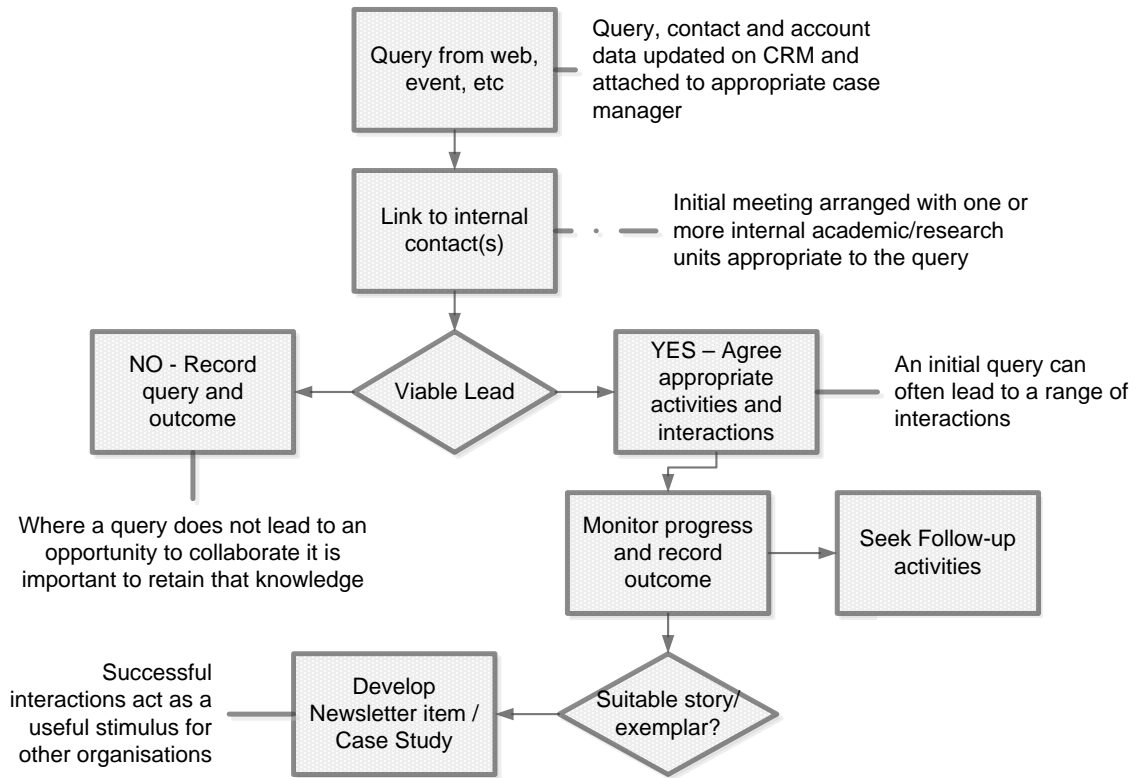


Figure 5 Process Flow for Engagement Interactions

In order to stimulate queries and to illustrate the practicalities of interaction with higher education case studies or exemplars have been developed and are included on the CIT Extended Campus website and disseminated through events and social media. Each case study addresses a specific interaction between an external organisation and CIT. The nature and outcome of the interaction is described as well as an outline of the steps taken and any difficulties encountered. In addition an electronic newsletter encouraging recipients to seek opportunities to interact is circulated.

Conclusions

While the role of higher education within society continues to evolve, the missions of higher education institutions vary and there is not, nor should there be, a single model of engagement with enterprise that is appropriate for all. Key elements in supporting and enhancing the engagement interactions including clarity of contact point, exemplars to illustrate the potential, institutional coherence, and professionalism at the interface can ensure that relationships are longer term and mutually beneficial. Within higher education institutions, linking across academic disciplines, collating external-facing activities and data sets and ensuring that the activity is clearly in line with the stated institutional mission and strategy is essential to ensure that the institution learns from the interactions and behaves entrepreneurially. This concept of applying customer relationship management techniques more commonly found in the business world within higher education supports the development of useful management information sets to inform strategic planning and cross-disciplinary responses.

In considering the impact of university-business collaboration Healy et al. (2014:65) assert that the benefits fall into four categories:

- Those that are aimed at strengthening levels of human capital, with labour supply and employment implications;
- Those that relate to stimulating entrepreneurship through teaching and learning;
- Those that relate to knowledge exchange, aimed at promoting or stimulating product/process innovation or new pedagogy;
- Those that relate to raising the profile of an organisation.

Within higher education, in times of significant resource and cost constraint, there is an onus on those involved in engagement with enterprise to provide convincing evidence to support continued efforts in this space. Justification, in the form of benefits to learners, enterprise, academics and the broader community, needs to be collated in order to support changes in institutional architecture.

There is considerable scope for further research in this field both in exploration of the experiences of varying industry sectors and enterprise sizes in interaction with academia as well as in opportunities to identify, benchmark and measure the impact of engagement activities on regional economic and social development over time. The relationship between the university and its region is of significant importance in ensuring that the university plays its part in contributing to social, economic and cultural value generation. That relationship is not a simple service arrangement but rather a set of complex and long term interrelated activities and objectives benefitting the student, the employer, the university and the community. These partnerships arise from intentional relationship building and stewarding, as well as resource commitment and a development of mutual understanding which leads to realistic expectations. While it is seductive to measure and compare the quantifiable metrics of new idea/new business generation and commercialisation, this focus does a disservice to the overall breadth of potential. Working together the university and enterprise and community groups can support:

- The relevance and currency of the learning and the formation of graduates,
- Flexible workforce development to meet changing needs incorporating practice-based learning;
- Generation, exploration and exploitation of new knowledge

Where engagement is a key part of the university's mission, the challenge for the university leadership, is to ensure that the engagement agenda is embedded throughout the core activities of teaching and research in an integrated way.

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