

Reaching Out

University Engagement in the Wider Economy

Activities and Attitudes of Academic and
Research Staff at Northumbria University

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1. Introduction

To aid the development of a 'knowledge economy', government is keen to encourage greater involvement of universities with industry and the wider community. The Higher Education Reach-out to Business and the Community (HEROBC) fund which has supported this study, is one of the mechanisms by which this relationship is being developed. At a regional level the potential contribution of universities is explicitly recognised by ONE North East, which has placed universities at the heart of its regional economic strategy.

This emphasis on increasing non-traditional externally-oriented activities raises questions about the capacity of universities to respond to the new challenges. Assuming that relevant skills exist within the body of university staff, this research project examined two critical determinants of an institution's capability for expanding such activities:

- How supportive of university involvement in external activities are its academic and research staff? (*attitude*)
- Does the university's operational systems (incentive structure etc) work in a way that encourages staff to engage in this kind of work? (*motivation*)

Previous research

Currently available research has focused on the *mechanisms* for connecting universities with Small and Medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and other organisations, involving case studies of successful initiatives and partnerships and highlighting best practice. This work has drawn substantially upon perspectives of senior managers in universities, with the roles and perspectives of university staff themselves given less attention.

The exception to this is the recent national survey of academics by the Association of University Teachers and Institute of Education, University of London (AUT/IOE). However, this survey had a comparatively small number of responses (348 nationally) with a strong bias towards traditional (pre-1992) universities (and longer-serving staff).

Northumbria University study

A questionnaire was sent (March 2001) to all Northumbria academic staff (excluding School Heads and above) and researchers. In all, 292 completed forms were returned, a 27% response rate, with a good representation by faculty, age and gender. A telephone survey of 49 non-respondents revealed that, in respect of the level of external engagement and views on such activity, there was very little to choose between the respondents and non-respondents.

The Northumbria study sought to build on the AUT/IOE study by investigating the roles and views of academic and related staff regarding external activities in a new university. It has done this by examining:

- Extent and nature of involvement
- Motivations for engaging in such activities
- Attitudes towards the University engaging in such activity.

The findings are intended to assist the University in (1) monitoring changes in external involvement over time and (2) identifying appropriate policies of support.

2. Survey findings

Level and type of engagement

The study found that 97% of respondents had been involved in external activity over the last three years, defined as including:

- ❑ *Educationally-based projects* (including student work placements, links with FE and schools)
- ❑ *Links with private business and commerce* (including consultancy, short courses)
- ❑ *Government and economic development agencies* (e.g. policy research)
- ❑ *Community-focused activities* (e.g. membership of advisory bodies)

Figure 1 shows the pattern of involvement at a more detailed level. Half of the respondents reported having active links or projects relating to business and commerce. While around half of those replying indicated they were involved in activities linked to non-business organisations (excluding HE-related links) with specifically *regional* partners, a substantial proportion of such activities were found to be *national* (40%) or *international* (19%) in scope. External links are thus far from simply focused locally.

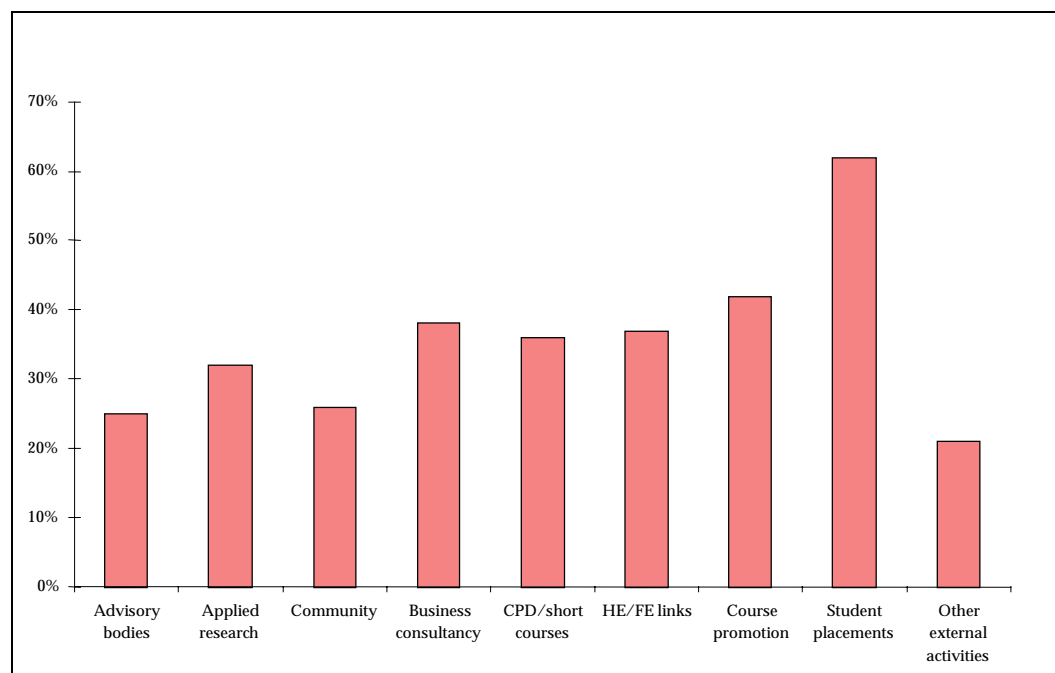


Figure 1 Types of external engagement (% of respondents)

Staff time commitment

As Figure 2 shows, there is great variation among externally-active staff members in terms of the time given to such work:

- ❑ More than 50% devote only a modest amount of time to these activities (up to one hour per day on average)
- ❑ Around 15% devote more significant amounts of their working time (1 to 2 hours per day) to such activities and a significant minority (30%) reports spending over ten hours per week on externally-oriented work.
- ❑ Allowing for full-time research staff, the survey shows that three academic staff in every twenty spends 10 or more hours per week on externally focused activities – indicating the presence of a sizeable group within the University which specialises in this sort of work.

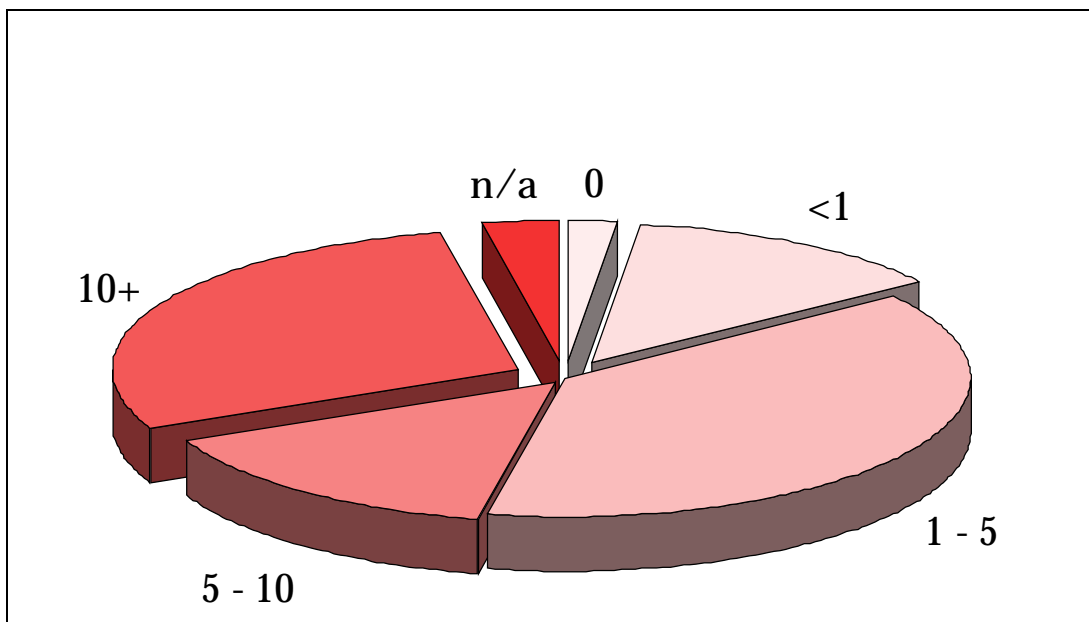


Figure 2 Hours per week spent by staff on external activities

Initiation of external activities

In the majority of cases, individuals or small groups of staff initiate these activities (fully or jointly 57% of all projects identified). The results indicate that a relatively small proportion of the projects are initiated at a school level (37%) and even fewer above that level (faculty 10%, above faculty 4%).

The survey draws attention to the importance for the development of the University's external role of the specific knowledge and external contacts possessed by key members of staff. The University relies substantially for the *generation* of external activity upon the enterprise of its main body of staff operating at a decentralised level.

Motivation and rewards

The survey identified a degree of inconsistency within the institution in terms of its management of external links - especially in relation to mechanisms affecting staff motivation to engage in such work.

- In only 20% of cases was time devoted to external activity formally recognised in *workloads* and in 33% of cases it was not recognised at all.

'We have no time for engagement - the School does not recognise it in terms of allocation of time'

'Staff should not be expected to do external work as an extra!'

- Staff want integration of external links into their formal workloads - 70% of respondents would increase their engagement if activities were recognised.

- Where activities are not (or are only partially) recognised, staff receive *additional payments* in only 33% of cases. Nearly half of these considered the payments inadequate for the extra work involved. Some 71% indicated that additional payments would lead to increased activity.

'Consultancy is hardly worthwhile when a large slice is taken by the Department and the work is then required to be done in one's own time'

'Yes, I would increase activity if I was remunerated more. But I suffer from a lack of clarity regarding how much work I am allowed to be paid for - this grey area is a disincentive'

- Six out of every 10 respondents believed external activities contributed to their *career development/promotion*; 30% believed they had no effect.
- Only half of the respondents engaging in such work reported that external activities were discussed in their *annual appraisals*.

Impact upon traditional or core activities

There are strong indications that external activities are often complementary to the core university roles of teaching and research (see Table 1 for more details):

- Seventy-five per cent consider that teaching and learning support, their own professional development, and advice to students positively benefited from their external involvements.

'It makes academic work become meaningful'

- Almost half considered that external activities had even impacted positively upon their RAE performance - with fewer than 10% believing otherwise.

- On the other hand - and predictably - most survey respondents felt that their administrative duties suffered as a result of engaging in such work.

Area of impact	Benefited considerably	Benefited slightly	No impact	Suffered slightly	Suffered considerably
Teaching and learning support	52.7	28.6	12.1	6.6	–
Research linked to RAE	31.6	26.3	32.9	5.3	3.9
Other research activities	34.7	28.0	26.7	6.7	4.0
Personal professional development	50.0	32.6	10.9	3.3	3.3
Advice to students	41.6	40.4	15.7	2.2	-
Administration	7.4	8.6	39.5	29.6	14.8

Table 1 Benefits and costs within the university of external activities (% of respondents)

Staff perspectives on the changing University role

The survey throws light also upon staff views on changes in the role of the University and the context in which it operates. While it is often assumed that academics are resistant to the notion of becoming more involved with business and commerce, for example, the evidence of the survey is clearly to the contrary: staff at Northumbria are very much aware of the wider context of their work. While staff support in principle for many externally-focused initiatives is not in doubt, comments made by respondents indicate a concern that proper support for such activities is made available.

- Returns show a high level of approval among staff (90%) for University engagement in activities supporting regional economic development – over half of these respondents ‘strongly agree’ with this notion.

‘We are part of the community and should help to encourage growth’

- Staff overwhelmingly (92%) believe the University should make research, teaching and consultancy skills of its staff accessible to commercial businesses.
- Respondents strongly support (93%) the view that courses should be designed with regional employers in mind; and where feasible, work experience should form a significant part of University courses.
- 70% of respondents agree with the view that the University should actively help to foster entrepreneurship.
- A clear majority of staff in principal support the idea of the University investing core funding into commercial ventures (57% for, 26% against) – although comments indicated that they were conscious of the need for the viability of core activities not to be endangered by such practices.

‘If it was new money for that purpose, then fine. Existing money, however, is much too small for current core activities’

'I'd support the idea providing it doesn't affect the budget for other areas of University activity'

- Considerably more staff are in favour than against using University money to pump-prime the development of business ventures *by staff*. In relation to the idea of supporting *student* ventures the balance was more even.

3. Conclusions and policy issues

The survey demonstrates that a very large proportion of the Northumbria University's academic and related staff are directly engaged in externally-focused activities. Moreover, the vast bulk of staff are supportive of the idea that the University should be engaged in the economic development process through developing appropriately-skilled graduates, assisting industry to improve its competitiveness, and playing a role in regional development, including the fostering of entrepreneurial attitudes.

More or less without exception, *both* the existing levels of external activity and degree of support for the University's engagement in such work is found to be higher than that recently reported by the AUT/IOE report based on a national survey. The Northumbria figures are high, not only in comparison with those from the older (pre-1992) universities in the AUT/IOE study, but also compared to those from the new universities included in the study.

To develop and support external developments, a number of policies might be considered:

1. Review *incentives* system as it relates to external activities. The system currently does not appear to operate uniformly across the University to encourage external engagement.
2. Review the system of *support* for such activities. An appropriate level and form of support is needed to assist staff to respond effectively to external opportunities. Centrally-provided services through to administrative arrangements within faculties and schools need to be reviewed to ensure that the needs of non-traditional markets are met effectively.
3. The core of staff members who are especially active in relation to external work not only need to be supported effectively, but should also be seen as a *resource* for the development of further links and projects. They have a potentially important role in terms of training, mentoring and devising of policies to build external activities. External linkage mechanisms need to ensure they *connect internally* with such individuals and groups as effectively as they do externally (as, for example, occurs through the UNNCEL units network).

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