

Northumbria Research Link

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**UNIVERSITY ENGAGEMENT IN THE ECONOMY:
ACTIVITIES AND ATTITUDES OF NORTHUMBRIA
UNIVERSITY STAFF**

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1. Context

- Government seeks greater involvement of universities with industry and wider community
- 'Knowledge economy' means high potential value of such activity to wider economy
- Higher Education Reach-out to Business and the Community (HEROBC) fund
- Regional development agency, ONE NorthEast, has placed universities 'at the heart' of its regional development strategy

2. Institutional capacity to respond

Crucial determinants of an institution's capability in this field...

- How supportive of university involvement in external activities are staff and of the various initiatives to support it?
- Does the university's incentive system operate in a way that encourages staff to engage in this kind of work?

3. Existing research

- Focus in existing research upon *mechanisms* for connecting universities with SMEs and other organisations - case studies of successful initiatives and partnerships, highlighting best practice.
- Existing research draws substantially upon perspectives of HEI senior managers - roles and perspectives of University staff themselves given less attention
- Exception - recent national survey by the Association of University Teachers (AUT) and Institute of Education, University of London
- But, comparatively small no. responses (348 nationally) and strong bias towards traditional (pre-1992) universities (and longer-serving staff) - yet *new universities* likely to be more active in terms of external engagements

4. Objectives of present study

- To investigate roles and views of academic and related staff regarding external activities in a new university
 - the extent and type of involvement
 - the motivations behind it, and
 - attitudes towards such activity.
- Analysis intended to assist University in (1) monitoring changes in external involvement, and (2) identifying appropriate policies of support.

5. The Survey

- Questionnaire sent (February/March 2001) to all UN academic staff (excl. School Heads and above) and researchers.
- 292 completed forms were returned; response rate 27%
- Good representation by faculty, age, gender; survey of non-respondents revealed similar in levels of external engagement and views on university role.

6. Measures of engagement: (1) numbers

- 97% of respondents involved in external activity over last 3 years, including
 - educationally-based projects
 - links with private business and commerce, and
 - government, economic development agencies etc
 - community-focused activities.
- While many of these activities involve regional partners, a substantial proportion are national or international in scope.

Table 3.1 Number of UN staff with external links (n=292)

	Current year	Previous 2 years	Full 3-year period	No activity
No. (%) respondents	279 (95%)	249 (85%)	284 (97%)	8 (3%)

NOT USED

Table 3.2 Educationally-based external links

Activity	Northumbria - current year (n=292)	Northumbria - previous 2 years (n=292)	AUT/loE survey (n=348)
Student work experience, placements	180 (62%)	160 (55%)	77 (22%)
Marketing/course promotion	123 (42%)	110 (38%)	97 (28%)
Links with educational institutions	109 (37%)	98 (34%)	97 (28%)

Table 3.3 Commercially-based links

Activity	Northumbria - current year (n=292)	Northumbria - previous 2 years (n=292)	AUT/loE national survey (n=348)
Consultancy	112 (38%)	116 (40%)	118 (34%)
Applied research	94 (32%)	84 (29%)	146 (42%)
CPD/short courses	106 (36%)	100 (34%)	87 (25%)

Table 3.4 Other external links

Activity	UN - current year (n=292)	UN - previous 2 years (n=292)	AUT/loE survey (n=348)
Community relations	77 (26%)	66 (23%)	73 (21%)
Membership of external advisory bodies	72 (25%)	62 (21%)	80 (23%)
Other external activities	61 (21%)	47 (16%)	n/a

7. Measures of engagement: (2) hours per week

- ❑ More than half of staff members devote only a modest amount of time to these activities (up to one hour per day on average)
- ❑ A significant minority devote over ten hours per week on external activities
- ❑ 1-2 academic staff in every ten spends 10+ hours/week – indicating presence of a specialist group within the university

8. Initiation source

- ❑ In the majority of cases, individuals or small groups of staff initiate these activities (fully or jointly 57% of all projects identified)
- ❑ Relatively small proportion of the projects initiated at school level (37%)
- ❑ Even fewer above that level (faculty 10%, above faculty 4%)

9. Motivation and rewards (1)

- ❑ Time devoted to external activity formally recognised in *workloads* in only one-fifth of cases. Not recognised at all in one-third of cases
 - '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 formal workload - 7 out of 10 respondents would increase their engagement if activities were recognised

10. Motivation and rewards (2)

- Where activities are not (or only partially) recognised, staff receive *additional payment* in only one-third of cases. Nearly half of these considered payments inadequate for extra work involved. 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*'
- 6 out of 10 respondents believed external activities contributed to their *career development/promotion*; 3 out of 10 believed they had no effect
- Only half of respondents reported external activities were discussed in their *annual appraisal*

11. Assessment of benefits and costs

- Respondents believed that a number of core University activities had benefited from external links
- 75% consider that teaching and learning support, 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 had a positive benefit upon their RAE performance – with fewer than one in ten believing otherwise. In some cases
- Most felt that administrative duties suffered.

12. Perspectives on changing University role

- High level of approval among staff (90%) for University engagement in activities supporting regional economic development – over half ‘strongly agreed’
 - ‘we are part of the community and should help to encourage growth’
- 92% said University should make research, teaching and consultancy skills of staff accessible to commercial businesses.
- Respondents strongly supported (93%) view that courses should be designed with regional employers in mind; and where feasible, work experience should form a significant part of University courses.
- 7 in 10 agree that University should help to foster entrepreneurship
- Clear majority in favour of University investing core funding into commercial ventures (57% for, 26% against)
 - ‘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 in favour of using University money to pump-prime development of business ventures *by staff* than against – though the balance in relation to *student* ventures was more even

13. Conclusions

- No authoritative national figures for comparison, but set against AUT/loE survey findings, Northumbria staff are very extensively engaged in external activities *and* highly positive in their evaluation of such work.
- Staff highly supportive of notion that University should be engaged in 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.

14. Policy areas

- Review *incentives* system and ensure it is applied evenly across the institution
- Ensure appropriate *support* is available - both at central services and decentralised (faculty/school) level
- Core of externally-active staff members should be seen as a *resource* for the development of further links and projects.
- External linkage mechanisms should seek to as effectively *connect internally* as they do to externally