

GMT interview

Introducing the National Centre for Universities and Business

with CEO, Dr David Docherty

The National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB) replaced the Council for Industry in Higher Education (CIHE) in April 2013. The NCUB isn't just a rebranding of the Council it is a new organisation arising directly from a recommendation in the Wilson review¹. Dr David Docherty² is the CEO of the NCUB, with experience of working as both an academic and an employer in a corporate business there is no one better to introduce to readers this new organisation which aims to bring together higher education institutions with businesses across the UK to build a world-class collaboration.

What are the aims of the NCUB?

We are focussed on three things: inventiveness and innovation, development of young talent and expertise, and the promotion and celebration of successful collaboration.

Innovation is crucial to economic growth and wellbeing. So the first thing that the NCUB aims to look at is the translation of inventiveness into innovation. What are the best ways to broker the relationship between what's going on in university departments and companies?

We know that businesses require people with the ability to keep on learning and with strong personal and social attributes like adaptability and team working that are increasingly important in business. So the second thing to explore is talent development in the broadest sense. Instead of just focusing on the development of skills, it's about the development of the rounded graduate. It's the same with the development of expertise – in other words the really high end talent needed to start companies and run companies whether they are world experts in technology or in social policy.

Finally, we have a responsibility to be a hub not only for great case studies, but for 'how to' guides to achieve successful collaboration.

How will the NCUB achieve these aims?

There are four pillars which will help us to achieve these aims: research and analysis, video-rich success stories, brokering services and actions.

Through research and analysis we will get a handle on what's going on in the partnership between businesses and universities. Every year we will publish a state of the relationship report which will round up everything we have learned throughout the year.

The second pillar is to look at video-rich success stories. We know that there are some fantastic stories both in innovation and talent development between businesses and universities.

Third is going to be really tough to do but we think it is astonishingly important, to try and provide brokerage platforms using online methodologies, like dating services almost, for quality work experience.

Finally, we will be introducing action-oriented projects and programmes so for example we've been running a project called the Brighton Fuse. Alongside the University of Brighton, the University of Sussex and the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Brighton Fuse brings together about 2,500 creative and digital companies in Brighton represented by a company called Wired Sussex. We're trying to figure out how this Brighton cluster emerged, how the universities can help it move on and what all that means for the relationship between small companies and the university system.

What are the biggest challenges for strengthening relationships between universities and business?

Most of the big challenges are cultural. People often

¹ Wilson, T (2012) A Review of Business – University Collaboration. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/further-education-skills/docs/w/12-610-wilson-review-business-university-collaboration>

² Dr David Docherty is the CEO of the National Centre of Universities and Business, and Chairman of the Digital Television Group, the industry body for digital television in the UK.

say that the speed at which people move in universities and business is not always the same. So how do we help with that in the NCUB?

There are serious issues around rewards. What is the best way to reward academics for engaging with businesses? This is a significant issue which is being addressed across the sector. Another challenge lies in making sure that companies have the abilities to be able to absorb what's going on in universities and have the level of knowledge and understanding capable of dealing with the intellectual property and inventiveness that's being generated within universities. I think there is also a big issue around technology. Technology platforms are evolving so that everything doesn't have to be face-to-face. Universities can't deal with 40 to 50,000 small companies at the same time but we know that online the technologies exist to enable social and business networks to emerge.

The NCUB has set out projects, initiatives and research which intend to help the National Centre meet its aims, can you tell us more about some of the projects.

Following on from the Brighton Fuse, which I mentioned earlier, there is London Creative and Digital Fusion which is a massive technology and knowledge exchange project between the universities and the creative and digital companies in London.

We are also working with some university partners to conduct research into quality work experience and brokering services to try to figure out what's going on in this area across the sector. No one really knows or has enough data on the work experiences for students across the sector, but increasingly universities are offering, if not guaranteeing work experience for everyone. What we are trying to figure out is what that means in terms of quality work experience and how that ties back into the student experience or the degree. I'd quite like to see some kind of quality kite mark which says this work experience is being thought through and will contribute to your education and your development as an employable person. But it's subject to whether businesses want it and universities are comfortable with it. It's not easy to introduce a kite mark but I think we need to do the research and we need to have the conversations with employers and with universities to try and make that happen.

Can you tell us more about how research and analysis will be used?

The State of the Relationship report every year will be based on research so it will inform and be a bedrock of

everything we do. We are currently looking hard at quality work experience, we're looking hard at the ways you translate inventiveness into innovation and we are looking hard again at STEM and the strategically important subjects and how to ensure that we've got enough of those for the economy.

The CIHE was a strategic network of blue-chip companies, will this be widened to include small to medium enterprises as members of the NCUB?

One of the many differences between the CIHE and the NCUB will be the broader membership base. We will be building on the network of the CIHE and widening it to include small to medium enterprises. The corporate membership of the CIHE has been around for 25 years, very rarely do you have that level of relationships with major corporates (and particularly at the highest levels in the companies) so we want to keep that. However, we're not looking for small companies to pay the same as big companies but we will be making a membership offer for small companies, as well as medium corporates and so on.

Equally, the old CIHE was capped by the number of universities that could be involved, that's just the way a council works but the NCUB will be open to every university and every institution offering higher education who wishes to be a member.

In order to broaden the membership base we have been building the team up in the membership services side quite rapidly. To go from a network of 70 people to a membership organisation with hundreds, if not thousands, is an entirely different exercise so it will be a very different organisation from that point of view.

In your time as CEO of the CIHE and NCUB, how has the collaboration between universities and businesses evolved/changed?

Clearly one of the biggest things in England to change has been the fees, which has made everyone think hard about what the role of universities is. It seems to me that universities are taking their responsibility to their undergraduates to help them get jobs and the right kinds of jobs very seriously. So certainly over the past four years I've noticed that that agenda has strengthened.

In business, there has been a move away from what is a constant focus on skills to a broader focus on talent. If you look inside most big companies they now call their HR department the 'talent department' and I think that is a good thing. Businesses are trying to develop rounded individuals because they are the people who

contribute most to their companies and we all need to take this seriously.

What universities have historically been about is developing rounded individuals. If I was still teaching at university as I did when I was young and someone told me that my job is to develop the next generation of talent, I would say 'absolutely'. But if I'd have been told that my job is to produce a graduate with a bunch of skills, I'd have said 'that's not my job, my job is to help people think'. Companies need people who can think as well as people who know what to do. We will be working hard with universities to develop this thinking and I think collectively we are pushing at an open door. But I think we need to develop a new language with which to describe the development of talent so that Government can engage in policy terms with what both parties are doing.

Who do you think is ultimately responsible for the transfer of graduate talent and knowledge into businesses?

I think it's a partnership, I don't think you can do it just by shouting at universities, that's just not sensible. We need to provide fora where sensible debate can happen. We need to recognise what we are dealing with here is that, despite the fact that the university population is older and more diverse now, we are still talking about 18 and 19 year olds and how we develop them into 21 and 22 year olds who can contribute quite quickly to business. That also needs a lot of thought from business. That's why I think it's not the responsibility of one party or another. It's the responsibility of the partnerships and the policies that go into developing those partnerships.

What role do you think the students and graduates play?

It's very interesting that when I talk about placements and quality work experience what often happens is that people say, 'well we've got more placements than we've got students'. I think students have got personal responsibility for themselves; it is all well and good the system creating the advantage but you'll disadvantage yourself if you don't take advantage of it. I think there is an issue that lies back in schools, people have to realise that it's a big tough world out here. But we don't want to lose the fun. Being educated is supposed to be fun! It's supposed to be self development and self-fulfilling so that's why I keep going on about roundedness. You want a rounded person who will take responsibility for themselves; you can't expect the whole thing to be handed to you on a plate.

Do you think that there is a difference between the level of collaboration between universities and businesses across the UK?

I do actually. I've travelled the length and breadth of the UK and everywhere I go there is willingness and a desire to engage but what's lacking are facilitating platforms that are systematic, well publicised and easy to use. But I don't detect any management team in any university in the country, nor any management team of any business that employs graduates, who doesn't care about this and doesn't want to see the UK being fantastically good at it.

How do you roll out the learning from projects like Talent 2030 and Brighton Fuse, to other parts of the UK?

The Brighton Fuse is just coming to an end this summer and the London Creative and Digital Fusion has another two years to run but we are trying to capture all of the things that we have learned since we started this project about three and a half years ago. A report will bundle the learning up and make it available to people as a methodology and as a brand.

How will the efforts of the NCUB be measured?

If you genuinely believe, all things being equal, that the financial sector will settle and the conditions for growth are there, then what we can measure is how successful we are at world-class collaboration. If your business sector is saying that our business and university collaboration is world-class and getting better and we can trace that back to things that we have done then that's a decent way of measuring it. We'll also be asking our universities and corporates, has the NCUB made any difference and if not, why not? I'm very happy to take on performance indicators of our success and our challenges because it's very important that we take responsibility for that.

How can universities and businesses become more involved with the work of the NCUB?

We would love every university to be a member, that's the first thing. The second thing is that we've launched our website, www.ncub.co.uk and we've got lots of success stories on there already but we would like people to contribute more. At some point in the next six months, we'll be launching a section of the website where anybody who has got a good story about business and university collaboration can post straight onto the website. We are basically looking for activists for the collaboration to come on and turn the site into something editorially vibrant and insightful but it can only happen if both businesses and universities embrace it and see value in it.