



Students and knowledge exchange in university business services: Case Studies

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Case study 1: Student Media Project. University of Gloucestershire

Overview and model

The Student Media Project (SMP) functions a subsidiary within the University of Gloucestershire's (UG) Media School. It mainly provides media production services to local businesses, charities and start-ups in Gloucestershire but also for UG itself. The unit provides work experience opportunities and mentorship to Media School students while also playing an active role in UG's technical skills teaching. The SMP currently have 11 ongoing projects and 12 confirmed but not started, with most of the customers being repeat customers.

The SMP was established towards the end of 2010, being heavily supported as a concept by the Head of the Media School at UG. Two UG graduates were invited to work with the SMP on a freelance basis managing the projects and inquiries the university would get about student media production work.

The SMP is not financially supported and yet profits are returned to UG. Projects are individually priced based on estimated hours to complete to which a UG overhead is allocated. Everything is fully costed so all the administrative and legal support required to run the projects is paid back as an internal transfer. The two UG graduates operate as freelancers are paid at daily rates to which some project management/administration time is added.

In the past they were paid a percentage of each contracted project. At the beginning the SMP work accounted for 20% of their work while currently it takes up to 80% of their time.

It is only recently that the unit was provided with space and hardware to work with on campus (which was bought out of their first year profits) and considerations of providing it with a further incubator space away from the campus are also being discussed. Due to its success, the SMP has become an important element in UG's business services showcase. Its contribution to the students' journey and employability are often mentioned in recruitment/ open day events as a successful case study and as a work experience opportunity for prospective students.

Clients sometimes come via academics, who then need student support; other times they come from contacts of students via work experience or placement. Students can join the SMP as part of a degree that requires them to complete a period of work experience. This takes up a minimum of five days and the students receive credits for their work. Students can also join the SMP on specific projects fitting their interests and skills and are therefore paid for their work at a standard £10/hour.

Depending on the nature of the project and the complexity of the work required, the SMP will work with students from all academic years at the Media School. Almost 100 students have been involved in SMP projects over the past 2.5 years.

Academic staff do not do any consultancy through the unit; their contact with the SMP is to provide support and information about the skills the students have or inviting the two SMP managers as guest lecturers.

The SMP has good awareness with local businesses and a high profile internally. It is strongly promoted via the local enterprise partnership by the Head of the Media School and has a high number of returning clients. Word of mouth also contributes to the promotion of the project together with the unit becoming recommended by lecturers to their students. As the unit runs as a subsidiary of UG, students are generally paid and the projects are managed by one of the two UG graduates. They try to work as a professional media production agency, with high standards of work and an ability to meet client deadlines irrespective of the time of year.

A big insurance company based in the region is one of SMP's most prestigious returning clients. UG's Head of the Media School remembered:

What was really interesting was that a company like (xxx) was saying, "We want media for our website that is authentic, and our audience is students. How much more authentic can you get than having students work for students?"

Word of mouth, prior contact with the University, a strategic fit between the company's audience and the university's student population were key here. The quality of the work and SMP's flexible budgeting according to the nature of the work are also essential in closing the deal.

University staff experience

The benefits to staff gained by working with SMP are largely the support of student projects whose modules require them to undertake a period of work experience. The SMP will provide live projects that meet the students' level of expertise and interest while monitoring the progress of the project, supporting the students and providing them with guidance and mentorship where needed. The SMP will mostly deal with the client (negotiating and clarifying the brief and tasks), freeing thus both the students and the academic staff of such burdens.

The variety of the projects covered and successful previous experiences, encourage members of staff (particularly those from the Film and Media Production degrees) to recommend and endorse the SMP as a worthy unit to work with.

There is no indication that academic staff work directly with the SMP except for identifying the students that could support specific projects. There is also nothing to suggest that academic research either informs, or is informed by the projects developed through the SMP. The focus here then is on student experience and external engagement.

We are a course that has just been Skillset re-accredited (...) All of the lecturers are practitioners and all of them have extensive industry experience. We have modules about creativity and modules technical training, which is obviously industry relevant, but also modules that [are] very specific about working in the industry, delivering to a client. I think that the Student Media Project is a perfect example of embedding professional practice within your course.

Overall there is a strong sense that the system is effective and that having the SMP embedded within parts the course while also having paid for and/or work experience opportunities for the student provides a high quality service to the university and its staff.

As an agency run by freelancers and employing students, with little guarantee of quality of the work, there was initial uncertainty from senior staff about the reputational risks associated with the venture. But the SMP seems to have overcome this and gained the full support of senior managers. It fills a niche even internally for producing video for students, about students and by students without jeopardizing the university's prior business relationships with other similar media production companies.

Student experience

Students are very positive about the value of their work with SMP for their studies and post-university career. They suggest as a highlight the ability to work in a field they enjoy, on a variety of projects and settings and being paid for it - although some said they would do the work even for free. The contact with the clients and their different demands they say provide them with 'real skills' – communication, technical and project management – while also challenging them to provide creative, fresh and innovative material.

The students value very much the support and guidance the SMP provides and perceive it as a safer environment to work and learn how to deal with real clients:

It's invaluable in terms of getting experience in the paid industry, so you can see how the filmmakers work with the clients and what sort of steps need to be taken to start shoots.

You feel like you're still a part of university, so you're a bit more secured than you would be in a completely separate film making company. You're protected still, you know you've got someone to turn to ask advice that stops you from making mistakes.

They also perceive the process as fair and the opportunities numerous, indicating that they can find out about projects via the SMP's email list, Facebook page, website and through their lecturers. They appreciate the flexibility the SMP work provides and believe it is not only choice but also their responsibility to pursue the projects.

It's voluntary at the end of the day. The only thing you lose by not doing is just the experience. You're not pressured or forced to work for the SMP, you do it in your own time, off your own back.

The students also appreciate positive the impact their work with the SMP can have on their academic and future career yet they stress the importance of planning and time-management. One student explains:

It's all about what we can fit into Uni. So you can either be really busy and succeed at academic and outside stuff like this, and really go for it, or you cannot do one or the other. But it's up to the student obviously.

Client experience

Just under half of the work undertaken through the SMP is for internal projects, many of them being videos or promotional videos for a variety of departments. For the marketing department to work with the SMP they waited for a contract with an external provider to expire and only then started commissioning smaller projects to the unit. Some challenges in working with students in the past are mentioned by clients, many of them relating to timing incompatibilities resulting from the structure and organization of the academic year. Initial concerns related to the students' standard of work also come up in the discussion but are quickly dismissed by emphasizing the past successful collaborations. The benefits of working with the SMP for clients include the ability for UG's marketing department to work with their own students and graduates and receive a professional-standard end product.

Physical proximity on campus is mentioned as a benefit by internal clients, as is the students' natural understanding of the university's key messages:

You know that what you are getting is what you'd expect from an external company which is brilliant. Besides, they are in-house so we can just pop across... (...) One of the benefits is that they are willing to do, so we can actually sit down, talk to them about the creative brief, go back to the drawing board, come back (...) and discuss and finalize details.

Key strengths and issues

The Student Media Project is considered to be very successful by UG. It makes a key contribution to the students' professional development and employability by providing them with many opportunities to work with external organizations while also being embedded in some of the Media School's courses. The SMP also provides mentoring and coaching to the students, providing both students and staff with the confidence that they are developing skills appropriate for working in the industry.

No negative experiences and downsides of the model were mentioned with exception to the initial concerns related to the delivery and quality of the students' work and its potential impact on the reputation of the university. Many mentions to professional practice were made during the interviews conducted however no references to linking the staff's research or knowledge transfer activities were made. Key strengths and issues are as follows:

- Project supports University's market proposition of employability and builds reputation of the HEI and its students.
- It brings no costs to the University as projects need to be fully costed and include a 20% overhead for UG. Moreover, profits from the SMP are retained by the University.
- It is supported by senior managers and staff.
- It provides a central point of contact to all stakeholders involved (external organizations, academic staff, and students) for media production work.
- It can undertake internal projects and has good relationships with other University departments.
- Projects are integrated into the modules that require students to undertake a period of work experience.
- It has a flexible pricing model and flexible working with a relatively fast turnaround of the final product.
- It does not engage academic staff directly in projects.
- Projects do not inform, and are not informed by research.



Case study 2: The Creative Enterprise Bureau. Bournemouth University

Overview and model

The Creative Enterprise Bureau (CEB) is a commercial-services unit operated from the Corporate and Marketing Communications (CMC) academic group within Bournemouth University's Media School. The three-year-old unit facilitates both 'live briefs' for advertising, marketing and PR degree modules and acts as an external-facing marketing agency offering business-critical work for clients that is carried out by students and staff working together.

The unit was developed to be integrated within the other work of the academic group (namely teaching and research) and enable staff and students to engage in knowledge exchange with all types of organisations. Staff and students see it as an opportunity for students to gain valuable consultancy experience for their future employability. Additionally, it is a way for staff to develop and maintain relationships with industry for teaching, ongoing professional practice, and to share their research and demonstrate 'impact'. Finally, it is a chance to bring money into the university through consultancy work. The unit brought in approximately £25,000 in its first year, £50,000 last year (2011-12), and is on target to bring in another £50,000 this year (2012-13).

The CEB is 'a very small corner of the bigger picture' of consultancy in the Media School and the university. BU supports the CEB through central services for accounting, legal and marketing, although staff believes there is scope for support to be more effective.

A small number of CMC's approximately 30 academic staff members are engaged with the CEB and have time allocated for enterprise on their workload. Of that small number, only about six are regularly involved in CEB work. This poses some potential capacity problems for the unit, especially if the CEB were to attempt to grow its business.

The unit primarily engages final year students who are paid for their work. Each year approximately 60 students, representing just under a third of final-year students, sign up to participate in CEB projects. However, only about 20-25 students are more actively engaged throughout the year.

Projects come from about 25 clients, including research agencies working with very large media clients to local and regional SMEs. CEB has established relationships with a few repeat clients that make up most of the unit's revenue. Developing those relationships has been an opportunity for the unit to see what CMC can best offer clients and how it fits "within the confines of the University and what we're capable of doing". As a staff member explains, "the skillset is there", but the administrative processes sometimes take time and limit how quickly the CEB can respond to a brief.

Teams of staff and students work on a variety of projects from academic literature reviews or research reports - especially for larger clients - to helping local and regional SMEs plan marketing communications, review current marketing practices, and conduct brand audits. It is important to those managing the CEB that all project work employs students and staff *together* otherwise consultancy could be seen to be a 'distraction' from teaching and research. As one lecturer says:

We want this to be part of what we do in the department. Not separate. The danger of consultancy is that if you've got a decent consultancy then you kind of stop your teaching, you stop your research to do consultancy.

Staff experience

Staff see benefits of CEB for themselves and the University, but especially students. It is a genuine synthesis of academic research, professional practice and education. For research-active staff, enterprise allows engagement with consultancy that demonstrates research 'impact' and a chance to expand their research interests. One lecturer said, she chooses enterprise projects that are sometimes different from her research because it 'opens your eyes to something'. For staff with professional backgrounds, working with the CEB is a natural extension of previous work. Further, enterprise links well to education as it is often integrated into modules and more opportunities are being explored to add to those links. Although CEB was created in advance of BU's Fusion strategy, many see the work as 'Fusion in action'.

Staff enjoy working with students on projects, although have also faced challenges with the variability of student work. As one lecturer explains:

Academics have to stand in. From a business point of view, that's the value of the CEB... But it does mean that if students let us down, the academic will stand in.

The core purposes of CEB also pose a tension, especially more recently as there have been changes in school management. As one staff member explains:

When it started out I was pretty sure that the aims were to involve students in commercial work, to generate income, and to support the regional business community. Now, I think we've built a model that really does answer to all three of them... What I'm struggling with right now is deciding which of those is the most important and which of those I should really prioritise.

Staff sense an increased pressure to bring in more money, but find support of school management inadequate (for example, the CEB generates all of its own business and gets no referrals from central business enquiries). Historically the CEB does not get asked to do internal projects, though this may be changing as they have taken on a research project for the marketing department.

Linked to this, problematic for CEB leaders is a lack of effective integration with and support from the university central services, as well as the way projects are costed. Full-economic costing makes projects expensive, sometimes too expensive for smaller businesses. Also, there have been problems with the way companies find the CEB through the University website and enquiries phoned into the switchboard.

Also an issue is the role enterprise plays in a balanced workload and its perceived value, especially for pay and progression. CMC includes enterprise in academic workloads, but other groups in the Media School offer it as an optional extra. Some staff question whether the university values it as much as other activities (especially research).

As noted above, only a small proportion of CMC staff is involved in the CEB. Staff cited the perceived lack of value by university rewards structures and a sense that enterprise could be intimidating for some. As one lecturer puts it:

Some staff in the department just don't want to get involved. And some of the reasons for that I think are revealed as a lack of confidence.

This takes us back to the model of SEU the CEB adopts, where staff are leading consultancy projects – under the pressures of a commercial setting – therefore taking many staff out of their comfort zone. Some staff see the clear benefits for their own research, teaching and enterprise activities; others lack the confidence to move beyond their established working practices.

Student experience

Students spoke highly of their CEB experience, citing how well it integrates with their education and the opportunity for CV/portfolio building. It enhanced their academic experience, enabling them to put learning into practice. They found project work and 'live briefs' to be valuable and interesting as it relates to 'real' industry problems.

That CEB pays students to work was a significant benefit for students, although students said they might have considered working without payment for the experience. One student said she'd considered but was unable to give up her part-time job for CEB work because university accounting procedures (being paid only monthly) would have meant "giving up cash flow for quite a long time".

Engagement with the CEB also enabled students to see other aspects of the University, as well as see the teaching staff in a new light. During CEB projects, academics treat students as equal partners, representing a symbolic relational shift from their traditional. Students speak positively of this:

It's nice because it opens your eyes up to how busy you guys are and the depth of your knowledge outside of our units.

She went on to say that for first and second-year students, it is common that students question why there's not more 'one-on-one time' with staff. She recalls thinking "you're here to serve us", but once working with the CEB she saw the value in what academics do outside of the classroom. Moreover, students report how much they learned by working *collaboratively* with staff: observing their working practices and getting feedback on their own work.

Because most paid-for projects exist outside of the curriculum, managing projects against coursework demands is the chief barrier for students to get involved with the CEB. For them, it was a matter of 'fitting in' the work around their dissertation in particular. As one student says:

When you go into final year, you go in so cautiously. The idea of signing up for actual work, you're immediately cautious of it, but if you manage your time it's doable.

Industry experience

About half of CEB's enterprise projects are research-based (especially consumer behavior research), and the other half is marketing communications, brand audits, and similar work. CEB clients include a few research agencies that bring repeat business. One such client says he works with academics because it offers insights into consumer behavior and consumer decision-making in ways that traditional market research would not.

Also, research by academic staff adds credibility and makes the work more marketable for the end client. As the research agency manager explains:

When you've got the academic underpinning, not only does that make the research more credible, when the client takes it to the marketplace and shows it off, it's great to actually be able to say we had Professor So-and-so or Dr So-and-so working on this.

The research agency markets the academic research as 'brain work' in each pitch for a client. Clients come to the CEB looking for specialists in the field, but also an awareness of the commercial nature of briefs. As the client explains he wants the research to:

throw light on the latest thinking, but also be commercial enough to say this is how you can use it for ITV or Channel 4.

Students working on projects are seen to add value in terms of the budget. Academic staff time is expensive, so balancing that against work done by students is seen to be a cost-saving measure.

One small issue from the client perspective is the academic calendar, which limits how quickly work can be turned around over the summer because of staff leave. Another client expressed the tension of wanting more academic (as opposed to student) time on the project, but accepted that this might make it unaffordable for them.

Key strengths and issues

The Creative Enterprise Bureau is successful from stakeholders' perspectives, although for some staff there remains questions about whether and to what extent the commercial imperative should be prioritised over student experience, professional practice, and impact of research.

Key strengths and issues include:

- The CEB acts as an external-facing professional consultancy, doing business-critical work that affects a company's bottom line.
- It provides consultancy experience for students to improve future employability.
- Students are paid, which demonstrates their value to consultancy and ensures students aren't exploited.
- Work is a genuine synthesis of academic research, professional practice and education, demonstrating the principles of BU's Fusion strategy.

- It is an opportunity for staff to engage in professional practice and maintain strong industry ties. Professionally-oriented staff feel CEB work is a natural fit with previous experience, and research-active staff see the opportunity to demonstrate research 'impact'.
- The model of *collaboration* between staff and students makes a positive difference to the way students view academics, and offers students insight to other aspects of university activity.
- For clients, academics add credibility and make research more marketable.
- Compared to other SEU's, CEB can offer quick turnaround to clients, not limited by the university calendar.
- A small number of academic staff engages with CEB, limiting potential for business growth.
- A tension exists relative to the core purpose of CEB. Is it for enterprise or education?
- Staff members question whether the university values enterprise as much other activities (research especially), and see an inconsistency in the approach to enterprise within the Media School.
- Some staff find enterprise intimidating.
- CEB does not appear to be effectively integrated into the university external business services, and there is a perceived lack of support from some central services and senior managers.
- Primarily using final year students can be problematic as they are balancing consultancy work against coursework demands.
- The FEC costing model makes work too expensive for some small businesses.

wbs projects

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Case study 3: Warwick Business School: WBS projects

Overview and model

The core aim of Warwick Business School (WBS) projects is to provide students on the full-time MBA and MSc courses¹ with the opportunity to carry out external business consultancy, which directly relates to their studies at WBS and is fully integrated into the assessment of their learning on the respective degree. This is seen as providing students with a return on the considerable investment they make in these courses, by enhancing their employability through real-life experience and the development of relevant skills and behaviours. For WBS the projects are seen to demonstrate the quality and talent of the students on these courses and provide a way to engage with the local business community, which may generate research and other business consultancy opportunities.

WBS have been running projects for many years and are a well-known part of the Business School offering, with many clients from a wide range of organisations, including charities, SMEs and global companies. Projects sit within the Careers Plus part of WBS and are administered by the Careers Plus team, who are the client-facing side of WBS. The broader remit of Careers Plus is to develop recruitment relations with clients and the project's activity is seen as a way to develop relationships.

The projects come from around 60 to 70 external clients each year and around 80% of the MBA and MSc students elect to do a project. Typically, WBS offers around 130 projects each year, so there are multiple projects per client; around 30 - 40% of clients have been previously involved with a project. WBS does not derive any income from the projects offered to students, although they are seen as an important part of engagement by WBS and therefore, by extension, the University. Students, however, can negotiate their own fee with clients, which can be £thousands (averaging £2,500 in 2012), depending on the case. Clients typically meet travel expenses associated with the project. There is no payment to academic staff.

The projects activity is part of WBS and is fully-funded by the Business School. There are four staff involved in administering the projects, including two relationship managers who liaise closely with clients on projects from initial interest to post-completion evaluation. The projects team manage the administration of projects, any non-disclosure agreements and any issues that arise from either side during the course of the project.

¹ Typically, MBA students have several years' business experience whereas MSc students are pre-experience students, often undertaking Masters level study immediately on completion of an undergraduate degree

As an embedded, compulsory part of the WBS MBA and MSc courses, students are required to produce a 15,000 word academic dissertation based on a specific business problem. Students produce an academic piece of work for assessment and a report for the client. The projects are individual and carried out in a 12 week period, typically from July – September each year, alongside the academic unit. The projects require students to develop solutions to business-critical and strategic challenges faced by these organisations in relevant areas of their studies. The deliverables can be a management report, a research document, a simulation model, and a project plan for implementation or a presentation of the consultancy project findings.

The recruiter relations team at WBS work with the client in developing the scope of the project to fit within the 12 week period, using a project template brief, known as the project charter. These initial project ideas are forwarded to the course academic project coordinator, who works with the academic supervisors to ensure that they meet the academic requirements of the respective programmes. Once a project list is developed, approved projects are advertised to students through the WBS online careers portal. Students respond with relevant information (CVs etc.) for the client to select those students with whom they wish to work.

Clients are aware that the students have to produce two pieces of work: the business project requirement and the academic assessed work. The outcome for the client is negotiated with the student and agreed from the outset, and is seen as a distinct piece of work from the academic dissertation.

WBS has recently extended the use of projects to include a group project on the Practice in Management unit of the MBA. Here WBS envisages 11-12 projects each year with a focus on working with charity and not-for-profit organisations. This extension is seen as a way for MBA students to become familiar on projects before engaging in the major summer project.

Staff experience

Academic staff on both MBA and MSc programmes are involved in the project activity at WBS from review of initial projects briefs to supervision of students whilst undertaking the project, to contacting the client in the exceptional event of problems with project execution. Academic staff review project briefs to determine fit with the learning outcomes of the programmes and engage in iterative discussions with client to scope the project, as required. Academics also determine where the project fits best in terms of programme and client expectations. Supervisors from the academic team are allocated to each project. Generally, the supervisor's role is focussed on the academic aspect of the project. However, in the event of problems on the project, the academic supervisor may get in contact with the client and/or the Careers Plus team to resolve issues.

Now they supervise the student rather than the project, necessarily, but some will have some contact with the client concerned...but the expectation on the academic is really to be supervising the student rather than having contact with the client.

Professional staff in the Careers Plus team are engaged in an intensive programme of building relationships with existing and new clients to ensure a flow of suitable project opportunities. This is the main activity for 6 months of the year for the four-strong team. The importance of an on-going, continuous relationship with clients, along with the quality of the WBS students was identified as key success factors for WBS projects:

Typically, I suppose, one of the issues is finding something that fits into, and is achievable within a 10 to 12 week period, over the summer period. Quite often there are situations around the scope of the project; quite often we find that clients are either over-scoping projects, and we then have to go backwards and forwards with various situations to bring it down to something that's actually manageable in the timeframe available.

Detailed discussion of the staff experience with academics at WBS was not possible.

Student experience

Students undertaking a project, are required to produce an academic piece of work (the dissertation) and fulfil the deliverables of the project brief, typically, a consultancy report and presentation. The client is often interested in the academic part of the work. However, it is only the dissertation that is assessed and the client report may be overlooked:

Some students put far more emphasis on the dissertation and then almost forget about the other one. We try to remind them of their expectations there and we do flag this up to them a lot in workshops before they go out.

For the student, it is challenging to meet the academic and client demands in a relatively short, 12 week timescale. The support from the client influences the quality of the student experience and much of the work of the relationship team is devoted to building trust and managing expectations with clients.

During the project the onus is very much on the student to take the necessary steps to understand the client project and organisation, devise an appropriate project plan, gather data and meet with people, so that the project report can be presented on time, as well as write a 15,000 word dissertation. Problems can occur with the scoping of the project, access to data and people, and the student's visibility at the client. It is when these issues impact on the progress of the project that an academic supervisor may step in. Interestingly, there is a much higher set of expectations for MBA students, who are likely to have had previous business experience, than MSc students:

We have a slightly different attitude towards the MSc students than the MBA students, but particularly with the MSc students, many of whom will have gone from school to first degree to second degree, without much lengthy involvement in a workplace. So I feel we owe it to them to make it as easy as possible, as we can, to work with us (client).

The benefits for the students are developmental and financial. Students can negotiate a fee with clients and expenses are reimbursed. More importantly, the experience of work on a defined business problem and the development of important business skills such as planning/organising, using initiative, analysis, written communication and creativity enhance employability. The combination of academic and client requirements leads to a synthesis of learning:

It wasn't until the end of the project that I felt that individual strand of the course I was doing actually came together. I found it (the project) was massively beneficial.

For the 80% of students who elect to take it, there was a perceived benefit over and above the academic project: *I think that the students who only do the desk-based research project, the academic part, they miss out. They don't get exposure to the client and look at the academic part at the same time. The dissertation would say: what are the marketing implications? The client would say: what are all the implications?*

Client experience

All work undertaken by WBS is for external clients. The number of clients is growing and WBS actively promotes the projects capability in company presentations, online and printed materials, although the projects activity itself is not separately branded. The whole process is planned and managed so that the expectations of the various stakeholders involved have the greatest chance of being met. These stakeholders include the company, and the project sponsors within the company, the student and WBS, who have to demonstrate that the projects meet the academic requirements of the course:

I think if people listen and understand and take the time to read, they ought to be able to understand what it's all about, and understand this concept of the three stakeholders.

As a result, clients work closely with WBS to identify and define projects well before they are advertised to students. For clients this means working internally at identifying suitable short-term projects, which are strategically or tactically important and that fit with the timetable for the project activities over the summer months of each course. Clients are expected to work with the WBS projects team and potentially academics in completing a "project charter", which becomes the opportunity advertised to students:

...there's an onus, both on the business sponsoring the potential project and on the University, to make sure there's an iterative process there, to get to an agreed statement of what the project is so that you've got clear expectations on both sides of that.

The effort required to get to this point is seen as valuable in terms of the benefits obtained: new thinking supported by academic rigour to address a defined and real business need. The support from the projects team is seen as vital in the process, as there are risks. There are expectations of quality of work, which vary depending on the course and level of previous work experience. There are risks of fit and compliance with client policies.

As part of the commitment to the projects, one organisation supports students with a personal mentor, to help them find their way around and nip any issues in the bud:

When we talk about this programme to our senior management we talk about it in our social responsibility type of thing. Being a local company to here we see this as part of working with the local community.

The level of satisfaction with projects seems high with many clients returning year after year. Some of these clients act as advocates of the scheme, supporting WBS at workshops and benefits:

We find it quite an invigorating experience. We actually enjoy people coming in and challenging, sometimes, the way in which we think about things.

Key strengths and issues

WBS projects is a long-running and reputable programme that provides appropriate project opportunities to MBS and MSc students that embeds challenging and relevant learning into the dissertation/project modules of these degrees. It supports the generation of employment opportunities and fosters WBS' business community goals. It is centrally run and internally funded within WBS, providing a clear focal point for students, staff and clients. The programme is effectively promoted, but unbranded, and the team have built excellent relationships with blue chip companies and organisations, which mean that a significant proportion returns for repeat projects. However, the effort is time and people-intensive, requiring support from a recruiter and administrative team and engagement from academic staff to source and scope projects suitable for the degree learning outcomes. Given the type of business problems involved, expectations from clients are high, particularly of MBA students. However, the support and processes followed seem to result in good student, client and staff experiences.

Key strengths and issues include:

- Track record of project delivery and repeat projects from long-standing clients.
- Project provides a differentiated approach for students with varying levels of experience and sets clear expectations with clients for support of students.
- Fully funded within WBS and supported by senior managers.
- Clear project processes and administration.
- Programme of project promotion with dedicated team in contact with clients.
- Projects are embedded into learning and developed in conjunction with course academics.

- Clients benefit from high quality students working on important and defined business needs with clear deliverables for the project sponsor.
- Intensive relationship-building, project sourcing and scoping support required.
- The sensitive nature of some of the projects mean that students may experience difficulty of access to data and people.
- Some students decide not to do a project (dissertation only route) and miss the learning opportunity and experience offered by a consultancy project.
- Some tension for students between applying for projects, completing academic work and concentrating on permanent job applications.
- The role of academic staff is largely limited to a supervisory capacity.



Venture Matrix™
Providing real world opportunities

Case study 4: Venture Matrix. Sheffield Hallam University

Overview and model

Venture Matrix (VM) is a centrally run Student Enterprise Unit at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU). It aims to find and support internal and external projects for students across the university. Although the focus is on Sheffield Business School and ACES (Arts, Computing, Engineering and Science), the project now goes beyond to all four faculties including Faculty of Health and Well-Being and Faculty of Development and Society. It has been established for approximately four and a half years and has become an important aspect of employability and a core part of the SHU's market positioning as 'graduate with more'. The unit provides support for consultancy experiences for students, helping them to develop key skills in teamwork, presentation, and the application of subject skills.

Venture Matrix is fully funded by SHU as part of a commitment to engagement activity and the development of graduate work experience and related skills. It charges many of the external organisations that it works with (some start-ups, NFPs and SMEs do not pay) a small registration fee (£100), but does not charge for consultancy work itself. This fees amount to total revenues of approximately £1500 a year and the money is used to support students working on projects. VM does not pay staff or students for their work on projects (with the exception of placements within the project itself). The unit currently has 6 full time staff and 2 placement students.

Existing projects come from approximately 100 external clients and an almost equal number of internal projects. VM works across the university although awareness and engagement varies between subject areas. The degree of staff involvement with Venture Matrix also varies, but is generally limited to supporting students. Staff do not do consultancy through the unit, although VM may refer some clients to consultancy areas within the University. Approximately 1800-2000 students are now involved with a wide range of projects across 52 modules across all levels (first year UG to Masters) and departments via VM². Students usually work in groups, selecting work from the projects identified by Venture Matrix that suit their course.

VM has good awareness with local businesses and a high profile internally. The website and various dissemination activities ensure that stakeholders are aware of its existence and role. Students also note that word of mouth effectively promotes the project, with the significance of the unit becoming more apparent to students as they progress through their course.

² First year students tend to work on local schools projects (50 or so per year), second year students internal projects, and final year students external projects.

Supporting the local business community was important objective of VM from its beginning. As such, clients come from a range of local and regional businesses, particularly SMEs, and VM especially helps with new business start-ups. However projects are deliberately and clearly restricted to non-critical work based on the limitations of student experience and performance (the standard of which cannot be guaranteed) and on timing (projects are only in term time).

Nutribox provides a typical example of a project. Nutribox is a Sheffield-based start-up business selling healthy snacks online. One of the co-founders of the business already had a contact at SHU and through this he was made aware of Venture Matrix and contacted them. After also checking the online material to better understand how a project works he arranged a meeting. This was the point where he came to understand the project and how it would help the business. Face-to-face contact is key here. After this Nutribox provided a range of non-critical project briefs to Venture Matrix. None had budgets attached to them, but Nutribox staff were willing to dedicate significant time to support students in return for their work on projects. The lack of a guarantee of quality was accepted and well understood. In this case however, the outcome was useful market research material that fulfilled the brief and although it was assessed, the academic staff at SHU had no input into the project itself or contact with Nutribox.

University staff experience

The benefits to staff gained by working with VM are largely the support of student projects for module assessment. VM provide quality live projects that can be used for assessment, and they support students and monitor the progress of projects. They take on client handling and administrative burdens, freeing academic staff to focus on pedagogy. The degree of involvement by staff varies. Often they may effectively hand over the entire planning and support role to VM. On other occasions academic staff work closely with VM when they want a project embedded in a module. Here an academic might express interest in doing a particular project and VM would work to get a good fit and scoping of potential clients. But fundamentally, there is always a need to ensure that the work adds pedagogic value. As one lecturer puts it:

I've got more a responsibility traditionally to make sure that there is some pedagogy attached to this - that we're just not doing a free project for clients - the students have got to actually get some educational value out of this...

Venture Matrix are flexible in ensuring that specific briefs fit with a specific module and will liaise with both client and academic staff to ensure that all needs are met. There is no indication that academics work directly with organisations either during or as a result of their involvement with VM projects. There is also nothing to suggest that academic research either informs, or is informed by the projects developed through VM. The focus here then is on student experience and external engagement.

Overall there is a strong sense that the system is effective and valued by most staff in terms of facilitating live briefs, but also by supporting client meetings, briefing and the internal paperwork (something which staff report as very time consuming and burdensome). There is, however, a suggestion that some established staff present some resistance to the project, based on them already having routinized assignments in place. New staff are inducted in such a way that they 'automatically' work with the project. There is a recognition that the scheme takes time to become embedded and valued within the business community and internally.

Venture Matrix as a central point of contact for student projects works well. For example, they take on the burden of ensuring that briefs are appropriate and that clients are managed. This includes the management of expectations, which seems especially important. The External Relationship Manager notes:

Because of the work our students produce, or create and do, there is always a question mark. You can never guarantee the result and the quality of the work. It is important to let the clients know this right at the start of the collaboration

Academic staff and the HEI recognise the value of this central point of contact. In addition a member of the Business School notes how this central contact may refer more specific external enquiries to other parts of the University:

A company would come to Venture Matrix and they would be able to point them more clearly in the direction of, "Well, you need to talk the engineering department or the art department," where ours is purely, perhaps, business things, and actually focussing on, perhaps, doing bespoke courses, seminars etc. for business.

Student experience

Students are very positive about the value of VM work. They highlight that the experience of working on live briefs provides 'real' skills, allows them to be creative and innovative, and adds value to real companies. They also note that the work is part of their assessments and so contributes to their degree and that projects give them an opportunity to get high marks for assignments. They are clear that working on these projects significantly strengthens their CVs and gives them something to discuss with potential employees. For example, one student explains:

It also gives you something to talk about at interviews... when you mention it, they seem quite interested. You can talk about all the different skills that you've used. So management, time organisation, and because you're working with an external client, it seems quite interesting and seems quite appealing.

Students also note the importance of being able to put theory into practice. They cite many cases where companies have been delighted with the work produced and in some cases they has led to job offers. Students also explain the value to the university in terms of helping them to improve their reputation (via the reputation of their students) and therefore also employability. One makes this point:

It's taking away some of the negative thoughts, of like students are lazy and university is just like theory based. Businesses in Sheffield are seeing that it helps them to create extra revenue streams. So they've become more involved in the Venture Matrix.

Several students link the value of the scheme to overall University aims, for example recruitment based on being able to offer students something more than lectures. For example one explains:

...because fees have increased recently, students are wanting to see more tangibles out of it. So with the Venture Matrix you can say, "You get to work with clients, within Sheffield."

Students do report potential problems with selecting projects to work on from the extensive list provided by VM. The problem with the central approach (from a student's point of view) is that there is a lot of choice and therefore responsibility to pick a good project. Students also report that there are occasionally issues with the fit between some projects and their studies. They comment about the difficulty of working in teams, but these are presented as minor issues. They are generally very positive about the support given by academics, VM staff and by the companies involved. However, some note that as things can change, and as the projects are all 'non-critical', sometimes projects may turn out to be less interesting than initially expected, and at other times company staff do not turn up to watch presentations. Just as companies cannot be sure of the quality of work by students, students cannot be sure about the quality of all projects.

Students highlight the importance of projects fitting within a module and especially the issue of time. If students are assessed on work (and it therefore counts towards their degree) they are happy to work on project according to the time allowed for the module. But they suggest that they are reluctant to work any more than this. They reject the idea of doing 'free' work outside of their course modules. They note that they have to balance VM work with both other areas of study and with part time work. As one explains:

I found it difficult when I couldn't get all my work done in the one day a week I was given and that really annoyed me. I found it difficult managing the time and how much work I had to do, because I had a part time job as well... Then obviously I'd have Uni and all my other assessments as well... Yes, I didn't feel like it was an actual job per se. I just thought it was one of my modules. I'm doing all my other modules and read so this was like module, kind of thing.

Client experience

Just under half of the work undertaken through Venture Matrix is for internal projects, thus providing opportunities for their own students to work on live projects. This also demonstrates a commitment to employability and provides a resource for small internal projects to be completed. Often it is first and second year undergraduates that take on these internal projects.

For external projects a range of businesses work with VM. Often the motivation is access to new ideas. However it is also clear that gaining consultancy for 'free' is a key motivation to use the scheme, especially for small companies and new start-ups. Many clients that use VM would not, or could not pay for commercial services. Generally companies are well briefed on the limitations of the project and the key issue here is that projects must not be critical to the business in terms of either time or focus. For example one client acknowledges:

You're working with a reasonably random group of students that have shown an interest in your particular project, but the capability within that group is not guaranteed in the way that it might be if you are paying a chunky fee to a marketing agency.

There is some indication that timing can be a limiting factor on the value for companies, including the delay between briefing and students taking on work. It can take several months for a project to be picked up by students. Companies work closely with VM on developing an appropriate brief and ensuring the project meets its aims. There is a strong indication that the majority of organisations work closely with students and the University and benefit from doing so.

There is, however, a suggestion that the university bureaucracy can be burdensome and works to suit the University rather than industry. A client explains:

It's a lot of nonsense; it's not thought-out in terms of balance, in terms of equitability with the organisational partner or the student partner. It's heavily loaded towards the perceived best interests of the university, and much of it is adding very little value to the overall process.

Organisations claim that they benefit greatly from input of students, especially in terms of new ideas and perspectives that come through teaching. Here there is an indirect link between academic work and the practical work undertaken in these projects.

Key strengths and issues

Venture Matrix is considered to be successful project that makes a key contribution to employability and to engagement with external organizations, something that it is at the heart of SHU's market offering. It is centrally run and fully internally funded, providing a focus for staff, students and external organizations and this is seen as vital for the success and growth of the project. For example the project Director makes it clear that:

Without senior support you can't do these things to the extent we have. That's a very key point for anybody who's going to try and replicate something like the Venture Matrix.

However, it is costly to support and does little to directly engage staff of their research in external knowledge transfer. Key strengths and issues are as follows:

- Project supports University's market proposition of employability and builds reputation of the HEI and their students.
- It is fully funded by the University and senior managers directly support it.
- It provides a central point of contact to all stakeholders involved (external organizations, academic staff, and students).
- It works with other departments, such as placements and careers.
- It can undertake internal projects, and also works with local schools.
- Projects are integrated into modules and support academics with assessment strategies.
- Provides extensive and meaningful projects for external organisations for free (with a small fee).
- It does not attempt to support business-critical projects because the quality of student work is variable and timing of projects limited by the academic timetable.
- It does not generate income (and therefore costs the HEI to maintain).
- Academic staff are involved in determining the modules where there is a project and working with VM in selecting the right clients, but they do not engage directly with projects.
- Projects do not inform, and are not informed by research.