

Lambert Review of Business – University Collaboration

In reply to your letter dated 3rd February 2003 with reference to the above, please find detailed below our response to your questions for consultation.

Q1 We would like to identify best practice and examples of excellence in business-university collaboration in the UK and abroad.

A Northern Foods plc is a UK-based organisation and much of our activity is focused on the UK, consequently all the examples quoted relate to UK-based universities. Of the examples given, all contacts were a result of direct contact from either the company or the university. No local Regional Development Agency or Sector Skills Council were involved.

Examples of collaboration:

- Research projects – we have several collaborative projects with a variety of universities, e.g. confidential research with the university of Glasgow on the design of microwave thermometry instruments.
- Informal contacts – these include the sponsorship of three Food Science undergraduates per year at the University of Nottingham.
- We offer approximately 18 work placements annually to sandwich students.
- We also have company representatives who have individual involvement, e.g. chair both The Food Safety Symposium at the University of Nottingham and the Advisory Board to the School of Food Biosciences at the University of Reading. Sit on the Food and Nutrition Advisory Group at Nottingham Trent University.
- We run several skills workshops at Universities to train students in interviewing skills.
- In conjunction with UMIST and John Moore's University, Liverpool we have inputted into the development of the Graduate Apprenticeship scheme for the Food Industry. This was co-ordinated by the Food & Drink NTO.
- Formal contacts – in partnership with Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield – we have developed our own postgraduate Certificate/Diploma in Food Manufacturing Management.
- Senior managers are represented on a number of University Boards, from research to the careers service.

Q2 If you do not have, or would like to strengthen such relationships, what are the main barriers to doing so?

A We have limited resources to interface with universities. We don't employ many people with the academic background or with the time and freedom to engage.

University research funding is deliberately about high quality science and not about solving problems. Relevance of research is improving, but can be too far away from useable science to be of interest.

Academic time scales are too long. Many research projects assume a three-year programme to allow a PhD student to complete a thesis.

We recruit only a small number of graduates with postgraduate qualifications.

Q3 How can business attract the best graduates and postgraduates with the skills that they require, especially in Technology?

A Food manufacturing is not seen as an attractive career compared to other industries.

We do receive quality applications from graduates looking for commercial and personnel roles. However, there is a declining number of quality graduates who are looking for careers in Food Science and Manufacturing/Operations

Most graduates start work lacking some of the "softer skills", e.g. teamworking and people management.

Company representatives occasionally get involved with universities to help ensure that curriculum is relevant to industry.

Lack of funding for MSc's may be a problem. Graduates with a general science degree and a large debt are being denied the opportunity to study in a narrower field to equip them for a specific industry. The food MSc courses are full with EU and non-EU students.

Q4 The review team will also want to understand whether financial considerations currently help or hinder the relationship between business and universities.

A Our R & D budget is small. R & D tax credits are very new for large businesses and have not resulted in an expansion of our R & D budget. R & D tax credits do not extend to product development, which could offer significant opportunities for further collaboration with food related disciplines.

The Food & Drink Federation Food Research Policy Group and the Chilled Foods Association have produced research priority papers to inform public funders of research needs.