

**Institution:** Harper Adams University College

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### **Examples of good practice**

#### **Type of collaborative activity:**

HE-business collaboration runs through all that we do. We operate degree and sub-degree programmes informed by, and closely related to, the needs of rural businesses, and which include sandwich placements in industry and commerce. We provide higher level skills training and CPD programmes to a wide variety of business clients. In addition, we operate a number of business networks, provide demonstration/technology transfer events in a range of rural activities, undertake applied research and provide consultancy services to the rural and food sectors. We were one of the first HEIs to join Business in the Community and have actively participated in the BiTC Rural Action campaign, which seeks to engage large companies in supporting the rural economy.

The importance of the rural economy has been summarised in a recent review by the Countryside Agency (Rural economies – Stepping stones to a healthier future, March 2003). The review noted that the rural economy has around 1 million enterprises, with more businesses per head of population and more women in self-employment than in urban areas. Rural local authorities host 34% of England's registered firms.

Our business clubs programme (supported originally by HEROBaC and now by HEIF I funding) is based on 4 themes of relevance to rural businesses:

**Women in Rural Enterprise (WiRE)** (rural entrepreneurship)

**Food SMEs in the West Midlands** (food safety and a range of other topics)

**On-Farm Composting** (including links to urban green waste management and LA21)

**Convalescent and Recuperative Environment** (small-scale, non-nursing convalescence and recuperation on farms and other rural accommodation)

**Marches Farm Enterprise Programme (MFEP)** (farm diversification)

Further details can be found at [www.harperadamsbusinessclubs.co.uk](http://www.harperadamsbusinessclubs.co.uk)

The WiRE programme was the first of these clubs and, as a result, is the most advanced. It has received considerable support from HSBC Bank, Business in the Community and other organisations. Full details of WiRE activities can be found at [www.wireuk.org](http://www.wireuk.org). In summary, the programme has supported rural women entrepreneurs by creating a research-informed business network providing training, development and rural-specific business advisory services tailored to the needs of rural entrepreneurs.

The initiative stands out because:

- It emerged from research undertaken on rural entrepreneurship and farm diversification (the latter as part of the MFEP programme – see above)
- It now has over 800 business club members from all parts of the UK – rural women entrepreneurs actively engaged in business in rural communities who feel confident in the College's ability to understand their business needs (because of our specialism) and provide a supportive networking environment
- WiRE has a core staff of 5, but uses the expertise of other staff within the College and from external agencies (see below) to provide rural business advisory services
- It has received considerable assistance from, and works in partnership with larger businesses and agencies who have helped provide training and mentoring for rural entrepreneurs (examples include British Gas, HSBC, KPMG and the BBC)

- The 'spin-in' from contacts with larger companies and the large range of SMEs assisted by the programme informs the College's curriculum and research programmes and already provides many features of a 'knowledge exchange' highlighted in the HE White Paper
- The annual WiRE conference has attracted senior Government ministers to 3 of its annual national conferences for women rural entrepreneurs; WiRE is a major component of the BiTC Rural Action programme in which HRH The Prince of Wales has taken a keen personal interest.
- The Director of the WiRE, Izzy Warren-Smith, is one of only 11 HEFCE/DTI funded business fellows
- Izzy was the recent winner of the Rural Enterprise Midlander of the Year award, sponsored by Carlton Television, in which the work of WiRE was commended by the Secretary of State for the Department of Trade and Industry
- WIRE has generated substantial external financial support, including funding from industry, Business Link and a variety of RDA related programmes
- WiRE is establishing 4 regional networks, with the support of HSBC Bank and various RDAs, including Yorkshire Forward, and is building its regional brand (with a national membership) to a national brand for rural business support

## **2. How did the project come about?**

The WiRE programme was based on research undertaken by Izzy Warren-Smith and other staff in the mid-1990s. Latterly, the link to the West Midlands RDA and our regional Government Office has been important in securing funding to continue WiRE's work. We have recently bid for ESF funding, with the RDA's support, which would allow significant growth in the programme's activities should it be awarded. WiRE, has also worked closely with Business Link and the RDAs in several other regions. Each regional link does, however, take a considerable amount of time to nurture and develop to the stage where political and financial support can be obtained. This fragmented approach is not always best when trying to establish national networks on specific themes such as rural entrepreneurship. We are working with our RDA on a number of other business/HEI strands (see below for examples).

## **3. Barriers to strengthening relationships**

In general, the College does not have many difficulties in building and managing relationships with its industries, principally because it is a specialist institution and so it is often approached by potential industrial/commercial partners, but also because this type of work is embedded within the organisation. The problem of obtaining a timely response from some universities has been highlighted in the CBI's survey (April 2003) on Promoting Effective Collaboration between Business and Higher Education. The problem is, however, being replicated in the drawn out processes for obtaining core funding to allow universities and Colleges to get on with providing support to business. The development of third stream funding has been piecemeal and slow, and is still unclear (eg the parameters for HEIF II funding need resolving quickly if gains made under HEROBaC, HEROBaC II and HEIF I are not to be lost). There is also a need for the parameters of the funding stream to be determined so that institutions can plan their approach to this activity with a degree of certainty. There are further problems in the lack of capital funding available to support 'reach-out' activities, which it is hoped will be addressed under new capital funding proposals under consideration by HEFCE.

## **4. Ensuring necessary employability skills**

Our student employability is consistently in the range of 92-95%. Of those not in employment on the census date, a significant number will be travelling because they already have work experience and often decide to take a break before going back into employment. The College, in conjunction with Writtle College has developed and launched an FDTL funded Professional Skills Programme for all undergraduate courses. This has embedded work-based skills training in the curriculum and has been positively received by employers. The programme was featured in a national conference on Higher Education Learning Partnerships held on 7 April at Woburn House.

## **5. Other views or comments**

The College deals with a wide range of technology transfer activities, from the smaller-scale businesses in networks such as WiRE, to those of large corporations such as TESCO. One of our staff is sponsored as a TESCO Research Fellow specifically to link up farmers with the needs of the retail industry and vice versa. We also have a close relationship with JCB Ltd, which has resulted in sponsorship for students and funding for part of a new building project, and whose expertise in staff recruitment has informed our HR Strategy and staff selection procedures. The West Midlands Higher Education Association has gained funding from our RDA to support 10 posts (Cluster Innovation Managers) to develop links between the 13 HEIs in the region in support of the 10 'Clusters' of industrial and business activity which are central to the RDA's strategic plan for economic development. The College has 2 of these 3-year seconded posts, in the Food and Leisure and Tourism clusters. The post holders will be working closely with the region's newest HEI, Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative studies, on this programme or work.

In return we provide an interface between various parts of the rural economy, and an environment in which the exchange of information and business networking can take place. As an example, we run agricultural awareness courses for Lloyds TSB Bank and HSBC Bank as well as a number of government agencies. This is clearly in line with business needs but also contributes to the DEFRA Sustainable Farming and Food Strategy in linking the farming community with consumers and other businesses. We provide graduates who are prepared for employment from their placement work and from the applied nature of their undergraduate or postgraduate programmes. These students often conduct research projects in their final year based on 'real-life' problems encountered during their placement period. In other cases, the placement student can be working in a SME or micro-business where they may provide a substantial part of the workforce. We receive many comments from such businesses about the important innovation role played by our students during their placement, and from students about the value of their placement in the final stages of their course and in seeking employment.

15 April 2003