

HERDA-SW Discussion Panel - November 2009

Response to CBI Report: Stronger Together: Businesses and Universities in Turbulent Times

Professor Steve West

1. Thanks to all of you for coming to this session today. And thanks to Melissa for organising this panel on what is a crucial topic for us all to engage with.

The role of universities has been, and continues to be, increasingly questioned from a variety of angles. By the public, businesses, the public sector, other educational providers and importantly, our staff and students and their parents. Each have a range of requirements from higher education, and a range of questions they want universities to address. The debate has certainly intensified this week with the launch of the government's vision for the future of HE.

Fundamentally what is the role, or roles, of a University sector, for society, the economy and individuals. Put simply what is the economic and societal impact of the work we do?

Universities are diverse, and the demands placed upon them can often be complementary, at other times they can be competing. Importantly though, this debate has provided significant impetus for the sector to move forward. Not in isolation, but through an increasing range of effective partnerships.

It was very promising to see Richard Lambert's and Steve Smith's joint article in the Guardian on Tuesday, where together they were clear in lobbying the government about the impact of UK universities on the economy, that they are vital to the future prosperity of the UK. It is important that universities and Business are speaking together on this. The UK is increasingly focused on being a knowledge economy – that economy is formed, nourished and supported through education working in Partnership with society and employers.

2. UWE welcomes the increasing dialogue that is evident in the CBI HE task force report Stronger Together: Businesses and Universities in Turbulent Times. The report, as I'm sure you are aware, engages with a variety of key themes. We shouldn't under estimate how difficult or important sustaining collaborative partnerships is during turbulent economic times. Suddenly partnership working gets that little bit harder when the oil (resources) start to dry up. Sharing gets harder!

As the public purse is squeezed universities may argue for more autonomy to focus on what they want to do in a Global Knowledge Economy, a line that the VC of Oxford University is frequently quoted for.

Then there are higher student fees and a market rate for loans to address the limitations of public funding. Clearly not a vote winner with our current or future student communities, and an issue that will over the next year generate much heated debate. As part of that there may be a call on those who have already benefited (us) having an additional tax placed upon them.

The onus will increasingly be on universities demonstrating how they will continue to enhance their delivery and the total student experience, whilst probably facing no rise in income from the increase in student fees – the so called 'flat cash scenario'.

The report also suggests that the government puts on hold the 50% participation rate, and instead focuses its efforts on schools. This is clearly something that is countered in respect of the recently published HE Framework where the need to widen participation across socio-economic and other under-represented communities is highlighted. So we want to widen participation, and I will argue through that, recognise the added value of that diversity and the significant contribution and opportunity it brings. That said clearly a route towards widening participation is through raising ambition and opportunity in our school system so there certainly is a great deal of logic behind putting more resources into working with schools. For me this is a better mechanism to increase participation in HE than the current bursary system – we are simply more likely to affect more lives by working through schools. This is something we spend a lot of time on at UWE, and we were the first University to sponsor a City Academy back in 2002. From that base we have broadened our engagement, support and enthusiasm and are seen as a significant player. Put that alongside our outreach and volunteering work and we can quickly see how UWE is making a significant impact in changing life chances and opportunities.

The report suggests there should be a balance between curiosity driven research and impact driven research, where previously the focus for some has been on curiosity driven research. The report is right to call for a balance here – but we must not be slavishly driven by short term quick impact research. Much of what is discovered in universities has a slow burnsome would argue sometimes too slow but nevertheless has made a significant contribution to society and business.

The report places a great deal of emphasis on the employability skills of graduates, again rightly so. Universities have a duty to ensure their graduates are prepared for life and work after graduation. Core competency skills need to be built into activities. And students need to be able to recognise that they are learning and developing these skills. At UWE we have put in place a Graduate Development Programme that goes some way to engaging with these activities. Again there is a balance; universities offer opportunity for people to grow as people, to experiment, to develop their consciousness and change their thinking and behaviours in addition to learning about their subject and developing new skills.

The report also identifies a lack of graduates to address shortages in areas of the STEM sector, where they need graduates with specific skills – e.g. nuclear technology.

And a shortage of information from universities about what they do or can offer is also highlighted. This is certainly an issue increasingly raised by Lord Mandelson, and one we really ought to be able to address. Again much of what we need to do is to look into the future and prepare.

Overall, UWE agrees and supports the flavour of the report. It provides a good basis for discussion in light of increasingly limited public funding. Whilst there is scope for universities to make efficiency savings, this period of shifting the source of funding from the public purse to the student purse, without any real increase in the unit of resource for universities, does make it difficult to deliver many of the things required to justify the suggested, and likely, increase in student fees.

3. The report certainly raises a variety of questions, to some extent contingent on the funding review, but nevertheless that we need to engage with. For example:

- How good do we want to be in the areas outlined in the report? Relative to other activities
- How committed are we to building the required partnerships? These are partnerships that will take a great deal of investment to build up, from both sides
- How engaged can these partnerships be?

There are a few areas that I want to mention, areas that are important to UWE and our students, where these questions come into play, and need to be addressed in order to move forward. The report highlights what business wants from HE and clearly asks business to do more on their side. These are some areas where we would like to see business do more.

4. Placements:

As part of the drive to ensure all graduates have employability skills we need to work together to increase the number of placement opportunities, whether internships, sandwich placements, or taking part in projects with employers. It is frequently identified that this is the best way to ensure graduate preparedness, but these clearly cannot be provided through the efforts of universities alone. We need to know that business is committed to this area in order to avoid a significant investment of resources on our part, without much of an outcome. At UWE, one third of our students currently experience some form of placement, and 85% take part in project work. For the benefit of our students we would like to offer the opportunity of a work-placement across all programmes. This involves both business and universities being clear on their commitment. The report suggests businesses should consider this. But without commitment on both sides we cannot begin to address how we will ensure that all students, across a diverse range of courses, have access to this opportunity.


5. Golden hellos:

The report suggests that businesses should also consider providing greater financial support for new graduate recruits. Certainly, given the expected rise in tuition fees and student debt, and the additional costs faced when graduates enter employment, this would be extremely helpful in order to encourage the best students into higher education. So that they can clearly see the benefits to a HE experience.

I am interested in what commitment there is to this in the business community.

6. Work-based learning:

One of the six business priorities that the report identifies is to encourage more work-force training. One aspect of this is work-based learning, whether accreditation of prior learning, or specifically designed work-based learning. At UWE we are investing in a Director of Work-based Learning to increase the co-ordination of these activities across UWE, and to oversee SHELL framework activities. However, to really deliver on the opportunities this presents, we need to develop more work-based learning resources, which again requires the commitment of business.



7. CPD and Consultancy:

Another area which I would like to draw attention to is CPD and consultancy. UWE currently engages in a diverse range of CPD provision, in Business, Education, Law, Health and Life Sciences, Engineering, Planning, Creative Arts, the Environment, Technology, Humanities and Social Sciences, and we offer bespoke training in a variety of areas. The report suggests that businesses should seek to engage with the HE system to develop and help finance bespoke training for their employees. Finance is clearly key here, and is frequently an obstacle. And we need to find better ways to engage – on both sides. So we can understand what businesses want and so that business can understand what universities can offer. This takes effort and commitment from both sides. We need to know that our investment in developing training resources will be worthwhile – we are working with limited funds.

8. Co-funded R&D:

The report encourages more collaboration on research and innovation. Again a point we would fully support. Universities invest a large amount of resource in research, particularly in its early stages. Engaging with partners to identify problems and develop solutions, to real-world critical issues, is the best way to encourage innovation. It also enhances the value of research by engaging with user needs throughout. By being involved as partners in research, business can expand the reach of the findings, demonstrating the connectivity that inspires, advances, and provides opportunity.

9. So, this leaves us with the following discussion questions that I hope to engage with David and yourselves on.

- Are both partners committed to delivery? And to what extent?
- How should we both prioritise delivery? I've been through some areas that are really important to us at UWE
- What are the obstacles we still need to overcome to get there?

Thank you.

