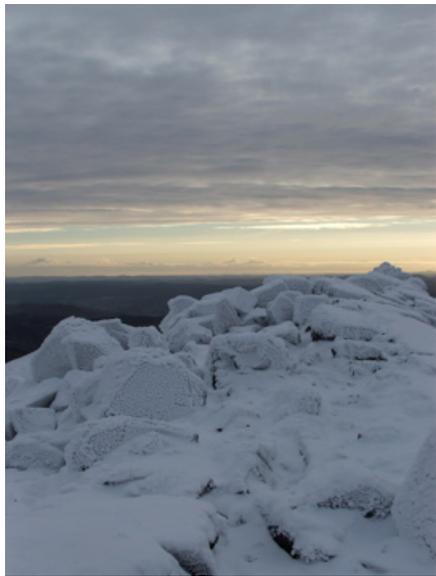


A new attempt to scale a difficult height

Stress testing BCE resolve in the real world—ENGAGE



Perhaps I tend towards skepticism when it comes to university collaboration with businesses around them and reported success to date.

That inclination is based on a number of experiences. One such was to have been told, by a committee comprising the elite business strategists of one of the top UK universities in 1994, that after careful deliberation this group was convinced that the internet would never be significant in this country and therefore any venture in that direction could not be supported!

Breaking new ground, creating new models, is something I feel strongly that a university should be involved in, assume some responsibility for, rise to the challenge of, and bear some of the inevitable brunt of early exploration of—for the benefit of the whole

community, of course. Isn't that part of the role of a publicly funded university?

Instead, I would suggest that, with some exceptions, success stories are often measured against what has *already* been accomplished, not what *could* be achieved. And there is a significant height between those two positions.

To be sure it's not a cosy height to climb. But I believe some are trying, quite determined to buck the trend. Among them are the champions of Business Community Engagement activities, sponsored by JISC in the UK.

All too often there is simply no sight of the height of the achievable above the unremarkable, and no inclination to look for it, and if seen by accident on a clear day then zilch appreciation of what is involved in scaling it.

A shame that the plains are awash with publicly funded agencies circling on well travelled routes, indifferent to the challenge of opening new roads up difficult ground to gain better visibility of options that are within reach. Options that just might inform, shape, bolster and comprise effective economic development.

A desire to see further is essential. The all too often alternative is to encourage isolated forays "into the wild". These are publicised as "supporting innovation and success" even though such excursions never get coordinated, the outputs benefit few if any, and lessons learned are retained only by the actors. Somewhat wasteful of resources at best!

My distinct impression is that BCE projects have the necessary vision to establish new practice.

One can only ride a four wheel drive so far up a mountain and then it calls for something that needs to be thought through and planned much more carefully. Progress will be slower, special equipment and provisions needed and a determination to push on despite inclement conditions amidst perceived (or genuine) abandonment. It's a serious

undertaking, with risks that can only be mitigated by well laid plans compiled with input from several parties with a range of relevant expertise.

BCE recognises the need for resources, expended wisely, funded from the public purse, but for a common benefit. Subject experts, researchers, financial advisers, those who have journeyed a particular way and learnt, assets that have accumulated over time and that should be available more readily to those who need them.

The public sector is not often regarded as a resource to support and help drive the private sector. As a one time academic who has found himself reincarnated to proffer web services in a business world, I am acutely sensitive to a gaping chasm between the private and public sectors—deeper and wider in some localities than others.

This chasm is directly proportional to the height between the mundane and the higher "what could be" in terms of collaboration opportunities and the resulting force in the economy.

I have been involved in one BCE project, which I have no reason to believe is different in nature to many others. Here there is a real desire for filling in the chasm and serving as a bridge in the interim.

The ENGAGE project recognises the importance of bringing together co-located private companies and higher education organisations. In the knowledge that some high profile links have been established preferentially already to individuals or private sector organisations beyond the local community (i.e. usually international and attaching kudos), the project is very focussed on encouraging and nurturing relationships between small or large local companies and complementary groups within Queens University Belfast or Belfast Metropolitan College.

The online portal that is being developed to serve this linkage is regarded as a "two way street", crediting those at either end with value to the other. Neither party is regarded as the poor partner. Publicly funded research can be justified through proof of concept in the field; new research can be initiated or existing hypotheses confirmed from observations gathered in real life scenarios; patents on the shelf can be deemed worthwhile from revenue earning implementations; brand new business models or markets conceived in a fusion of ideas converging from different directions.

A virtual meeting place for those with common interests in different sectors sharing a desire to combine forces on collaborative ventures to realise new heights of potential.

And the equipment required for those expeditions is at hand, presented as assets that have been added to a common register, in the form of what particular individuals, groups or companies can offer partners in exchange for resources they are in short supply of.

ENGAGE is making use of and reinforcing pathways that already lead part of the way to higher ground. The most prominent is the university consultation service at Queens which allows members of the academic staff to register for the provision of a limited amount of private consultation. These experts now have the opportunity of being involved in projects that are tracked and supported by a small dedicated project team intent on leveraging available resources wherever possible and matching parties where information and lessons can be shared rather than being rediscovered and relearnt.

Yes, there are issues to be dealt with, not least access management to university systems by non university members. But these are important matters to grapple with and simply highlight the need for different ways of doing things. The project is regarded

as a vanguard that will produce feedback that can only be useful in determining what future tactics may be necessary.

With more than £50m annual funding for research to one of the parent institutions, ENGAGE is a golden opportunity for researchers to demonstrate the merit of their work by involving it in revenue generation or combining it with inputs that reinforce its efficacy as a public record.

But more important, ENGAGE represents a "no strings attached" opening for any business in Northern Ireland to avail of resources that should be available to them, on their terms.

I wish ENGAGE every success and trust it will reshape attitudes on the meaning of real economic development and the important role of BCE.

Project website: <http://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/engage/>

Portal website (July 2011): <http://www.engageni.ac.uk/>

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