

Enabling the Interface: Access to Resources & Open Innovation

The challenge

Studies¹ carried out with businesses by Jisc in 2008/9 demonstrated a clear demand for greater access to business information resources. Businesses needed support for a range of activities such as business planning, growth and expansion, horizon scanning, licencing and student enterprise.

Recent investment in Access to Resources and Open Innovation was to support and enhance innovation both within universities and by universities for the wider economy and society.

Access to Resources projects have supported the development of institutionally-led local partnerships, providing integrated online information services for external parties. For businesses, access to the information is more important than who provides it.

For Open Innovation the recommendation was to trial online systems to facilitate collaboration and co-development between universities and external partners. The systems focused on novel online methods to address culture, defining the problem, finding the right people and trust, as well as deliver improved access to resources.

“It’s been well researched that there are many many barriers to SMEs engaging with university knowledge assets, and the purpose of the Engage project is to overcome that.”

Paul Donachy, Research and Enterprise Directorate, Queen’s University Belfast

Enhancing strategic engagement

Through a Jisc BCE call, institutions were provided an opportunity to develop their strategic engagement ‘offer’ and to enhance their connections with external partners for mutual benefit.

The focus was less on the technological features of access to resources and open innovation and more on the partnership opportunities, new business models and innovation possibilities.

A Jisc funded portfolio of eight projects in Access to Resources and Open Innovation sought to enhance institutions’ presence and services online for, and in partnership with, businesses.

They all shared a common set of themes, which included an emphasis on their exploratory nature in innovation; creating new services online; and a focus on partnerships.

One of the main aims of the portfolio of projects was to enhance access for SMEs, entrepreneurs and other external parties to the information and knowledge, or innovation and collaboration opportunities within the institution which could help inform, improve, develop or sustain their business or venture.

The projects varied from using digital technologies, such as online events and video content, to help businesses engage in knowledge exchange with Higher Education at a time, place and in a format that suited them; to the formation of a regional information hub for the promotion of network services for the business community; and the development of an application providing time and location sensitive content to smart phones.

A second portfolio of 11 projects was funded to further develop the themes.

Expected benefits

Five Access to Resources projects were funded to enhance the institutional offer in leading collaborative provision of information and knowledge to business and community organisations and individuals, especially SMEs.

Three Open Innovation projects were funded with the aim of enhancing the institutional impact in open innovation marketplaces and effectiveness in online co-development with external parties.

¹ www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/bce/stream4resfinalreport.pdf
www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/bce/facilitatingopeninnovationstudyfinalreport.pdf

Addressing the challenge

New ways to connect with businesses

OPEN Biz - University of Edinburgh (on behalf of Scottish Universities)

In collaboration with five partner universities the OPEN Biz project blended existing and new digital tools to enhance business access to the world class academic expertise in Scottish universities.

Businesses are keen to tap into the knowledge, expertise and facilities within academic institutions but often do not know what is available or how to engage.

OPEN Biz involved the pilot of an online platform to support and enhance Scottish universities' engagement with the wider community through videos, webcasting and mobile applications.

Live blended webinars opened up event participation to a virtual audience, whose interaction has been coupled with moderated online discussion.

The InterfaceOn App has been designed and developed to meet the needs of time and cost-constrained business. Mobile devices are now regularly used to access information from email to web browsing to editing documents on the move.

The app offers users the chance to find out more about accessing university expertise; discovering potential sources of funding to support collaborative activity; and viewing successful case studies – all at the click of a button.

Through these activities OPEN Biz has supported Scottish Universities to expand their communication with businesses, social enterprises, charities and business advisors.

Widening access for businesses and increasing innovative and collaborative activity is in line with current economic development policy.



www.interface-online.org.uk/4231

Access to Resources projects

ENGAGE

Queen's University Belfast

Built on the existing relationship with Belfast Metropolitan College to deliver regional sector-specific joined-up knowledge and information services.

www.engageni.ac.uk

OPEN Biz

University of Edinburgh

Investigated whether new methods to engage online could lead to higher levels of business-academic engagement in the West of Scotland.

www.interface-online.org.uk

elnovate

South Devon College

Developed an online innovation portal to increase the delivery efficiency to, and the client base of, the South West Innovation Accelerator Project.

<http://bit.ly/t7xBwi>

RES-KN

University of Plymouth

Was set up to provide mediated services with guidance and information to rural businesses and community organisations in the South West.

www.ruralenterprisesolutions.co.uk

Open Innovation projects

BRACKEN

Swansea Metropolitan University

Integrated the business support activities of the South West Wales Vocational Support Initiative network into an online information hub.

sites.google.com/site/swwvsi

REALISE

University of Southampton

Creates links and brokers collaboration across sectors working in the field of open innovation and assistive technology.

www.realisepotential.org

MyMobileBristol

University of Bristol

Delivered, in collaboration with Bristol City Council, a demonstrator service providing time and location sensitive content to smartphones.

m.bristol.ac.uk

O2I - Online Open Innovation

Cornwall College

With University of Plymouth, demonstrated how digital technologies can provide a new distribution channel for ideas and collaboration.

www.o2i.org.uk

Online community helps nurture ideas into business

REALISE - University of Southampton

The REfining and Learning from online tools for Internet Shared Enterprise (REALISE) project has developed an online marketplace which offers those interested an opportunity to engage with open innovation for Assistive Technologies (AT) that support those with disabilities and the elderly.

"We have learned that we need to spend more time liaising with organisations that support, develop and sell Assistive Technologies to make sure we encourage wider community engagement and sustainability for the project as well as those involved in the open source community."

- E.A.Draffan, REALISE project manager

REALISE works by inviting anyone in the community to submit ideas on how to make technology easier to use for all. These ideas are then openly discussed, helping to gain a consensus and move to an 'incubation' stage.

Idea Incubator Business



In the incubator a lead group or individual can attempt to gain financial or development support to establish a fully-fledged assistive technology project.

"...turns the approach on its head compared to the traditional way of starting a project. This could be transferred outside of assistive technologies."

- Brian McCaul, KT2.0, critical friend

The team evaluated existing content management systems but none offered the support mechanisms or necessary activity levels, so they developed their own, open source, solution. This means they have developed accessible log-in and comment systems, as well as linking up to appropriate open source solutions from elsewhere, such as a Google discussion group facility.

Further, they have also been able to link a database of AT products to the REALISE marketplace to indicate to the community of users what already exists in the open source community.

"...it is very ambitious and well organised and it looks good."

- Nigel Spencer, British Library, critical friend

 www.realisepotential.org/

Meaningful mobile experience

MyMobileBristol - University of Bristol

MyMobileBristol project integrated their Mobile Campus Assistant software with data provided by Bristol City Council.

The project exceeded expectations in generating and sustaining institutional interest when providing mobile solutions to meet various stakeholder requirements.

Successes were identified particularly with respect to joining up services such as learning and teaching, campus information, marketing and student recruitment.

The project also helped Bristol City Council in their ambition to become a 'Smart City' where innovation can drive smarter solutions in power consumption and transport. Working with an external partner made the

project more useful, economically viable, and sustainable.

'Real time' information about available transport and facilities is becoming an essential resource for residents and visitors in most cities and towns, and is especially valuable for students.

MyMobileBristol provides precisely this service for a range of requirements, from when the next bus is due to which events are on nearby to the location of the nearest available university computer workstation.

Engagement with internal stakeholders identified that there was an expectation that this kind of app should be available through proprietary stores such as iTunes or the Android Marketplace.

The content is optimised for smartphones with a "just in time" and "on the move" context.

The team wrote a native iPhone application to provide content for prospective students and plan to develop lightweight 'wrapper' applications for other platforms (e.g. Blackberry, Android, Symbian) using Mobile Campus Assistant as a data source.

They were also successful in attracting further development funding to produce Jisc Mobile, a cut-down version of the Jisc website, optimised for mobile use.

The site contains recent content that users are likely to want to access whilst on the move, such as news items or podcasts. It doesn't contain all the content on the Jisc website.

 m.bristol.ac.uk/

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Benefits and impact

The main benefit to the portfolio of projects was to enhance access for SMEs, entrepreneurs and other external parties to the information and knowledge, innovation and collaboration opportunities within institutions to help inform, improve, develop or sustain their business or venture.

Following the OPEN Biz pilot activities businesses and their advisors reported improved access to HEIs (especially in terms of knowing who to contact), and an increased understanding of how knowledge exchange could benefit their company.

Interface, who ran the project, have found that the pilot activities have directly led to new collaborative projects with academic institutions which should, in time, lead to increased sales and economic returns.

For some of the projects understanding what institutional knowledge assets are available and could be useful and then linking them up was a significant challenge, however, this has been effectively achieved by most of the projects.

Many projects discovered that they should have involved the businesses they were trying to reach out to more during their portal development. The elnnovate project found that had they had feedback from a survey with business users earlier they would have both saved time and enabled better collaboration.

One of the key things of this service is that it would lead to business collaboration which is the foundation of Open Innovation, and although utilising the website has not happened at this stage, businesses have talked to each other and that is a great outcome for the project.

Paul Donachy, Research and Enterprise Directorate, Queen's University Belfast

The O2I project carried out an evaluation into the experiences of the businesses participating in the pilot. Findings suggested that around a third of the businesses improved their understanding of 'open innovation' following contact with the project.

The O2I project found that there was already and existing culture of open innovation amongst the businesses who got involved in the pilot. The approach has yet to be tested with a larger sample of businesses to see if it can change their attitudes and engage them in the online open innovation process.

The platform developed by O2I has provided a forum to showcase knowledge, expertise and intellectual property held by Cornwall College and Plymouth University.

The Bracken project team observed tangible changes in their relationships with external partners; the project demonstrated the value that sector-specific business support agencies brought to institutional business support services which has led to the recommendation that this aspect of the local support initiative should be strengthened.

Early identification of what businesses actually need was found to be important in ensuring their engagement with potential services and resources on offer. "Being receptive to user needs is as important as being pro-active in responding to them" (O2I project evaluation). In the second phase of the initiative, projects have been encouraged to consult early on how their service can fulfil businesses wants and needs.

EngageNI represents a very unique and interesting opportunity for companies like ourselves to get involved in more collaborative research projects.

Seamus McKillop, Director, Semple and McKillop Consulting Engineers

Lessons learnt

The programme identified several best practices for approaches and methods. The second phase of projects will be encouraged to:

- Adopt innovative techniques to extend their user community, such as "bring a friend", or engage with companies who can recruit other businesses who may benefit
- Work in partnership with chambers of commerce, or business information services elsewhere to extend their reach with other bodies who also support businesses
- Work with people experienced with the media to develop PR 'hot' services, which are memorable and mean something to the constituency of proposed users