

INNOVATION IN ACADEMIA

West Yorkshire's universities and colleges are breaking new ground in working with local businesses

The message that business schools are important drivers for companies looking to improve their performance has clearly reached West Yorkshire.

Bradford University School of Management has already devised bespoke courses for diverse clients such as as Emirates Airlines, The Royal Bank of Scotland, Bradford MBC and Morrisons.

Now its director of executive education, Julian Rawel, says the £500m-turnover building services specialist NG Bailey has signed up for a comprehensive training programme.

"The company is right in the middle of a very tricky period for the construction industry, which wants the people who manage its projects to develop greater economic understanding," he says.

Rawel says Bailey exemplifies the trend for companies to commission bespoke training and include middle management in their programme.

"There's always a danger when companies look to upgrade skills at a senior level that they just send their directors over to Harvard and let them decide the new strategy when they're back.

"If you are a plc board director, though, you have an awful lot to do, so the job of driving the new approach is down to middle management. Unfortunately, the people then responsible for implementing and delivering the strategy don't really understand it."

Bradford MBC has followed the same route, for its new training scheme.

"The chief executive and the central management team are taking part, but so will their colleagues at the assistant director level, which will be another 30 and 40 people," adds Rawel.

Leeds University Business School's head of corporate and international relations, Marc Smelik, is also about to run a new training project. Forty companies have signed up for the project, which will be launched formally before the year-end, and if the pilot programme performs as expected, the scheme will be rolled out nationally.

Smelik and his colleagues are working on projects at opposite ends of the corporate scale, too; offering assistance to smaller businesses setting out on the path to growth and devising leadership development programmes for sizeable regional companies.

"Small businesses will drive employment growth in the next few years, so we are working, with Bradford, to develop a knowledge network aimed at helping them increase their skills," he says.

"We are also making sure that enterprise really is embedded into our curriculum, because it's critical that our graduates understand how business works and develop entrepreneurial mindsets. For existing management,



PICTURED FROM TOP
Julian Rawel, Katie
Rigarfsford and Marc Smelik

"Small businesses will drive employment growth so we are developing a knowledge network."

we largely focus on developing their confidence, by helping them to understand their strengths and also their weaknesses."

Elsewhere in the city, the Leeds Enterprise Network's website will go live, after its offline activities proved such a success. The networking initiative was conceived by Leeds City College, Leeds University and Leeds Metropolitan University, as the latter's Katie Rigarfsford explains.

"Networking is obviously vital to business success, and especially so during the economic uncertainty, so we thought it would be useful to have regular meetings, with high-profile speakers, which also offered a 'soft' introduction to networking," she says. "We won funding for the current year from Business Link Yorkshire, and have been getting 70 people or so to attend each event. Now we are looking for more funding from our commercial partners."

Rigarfsford is operations manager at QU2 – the Met's business incubator space for fledgling ventures – and its achievements have persuaded the university to acquire more offices in the Queen Square area.

"We have 15 offices and are about to get another five in an adjacent building. Some incubators are just for graduates and students, but we are a little bit different. We have spaces for start-ups in the university, and we are for businesses at the next stage."

QU2's strategy is to weed out the time-wasters by charging a small amount for space and using the money to increase the level of support, and it clearly works.

"We were set up nine years ago, for creative companies, but now we will take on businesses in any high-growth sector. Most are business-to-business operations, and we aren't here to support lifestyle businesses," says Rigarfsford.

"We have a really excellent business adviser. We do a comprehensive ten-week business development course, covering sales, marketing, finance and law, and then they do a leadership management course, perhaps at the end of their first year.

"We also bring in local lawyers, accountants and marketing experts to increase everyone's skills, and give them a wider awareness of the business world. The usual survival rate for start-ups is 50 per cent, but we are running at 95 per cent, so we are all very proud of what we have achieved."