The InnoTech Centre was set up by South West College in Northern Ireland to nurture the growth of technology and innovation in local companies. The centre has since become a nexus between industry and education, using the skills of its staff to match companies with students with specialist expertise in science, engineering or technology.

Organisation

With some 14,000 enrolments, South West College makes a major contribution to the local and regional economy by supporting a wide range of higher education, vocational and training courses on campuses in Cookstown, Dungannon, Enniskillen and Omagh.

The InnoTech Centre is based at the Cookstown campus and provides opportunities for training, technical mentoring and project management for local businesses aiming to adopt new technologies and embed innovative approaches. The centre has also worked on partnership projects with colleges, businesses and organisations outside Northern Ireland.
The centre is supported through input from the sector skills councils, local councils, regional enterprise development bodies and universities and is financed by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) through its Innovation Fund Employer Support programme. Stakeholders in the InnoTech steering group include representatives from industry who facilitate project development by providing consultation on aspects such as sustainable development.

**Context and Challenge**

The UK economy depends on the success of its small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and nowhere is this truer than in Northern Ireland. The college wanted to make a significant contribution to the government’s agenda for growth through SMEs by becoming a key driver of local, sub-regional and regional economic development. To achieve this, it first needed to promote stronger ties with local firms through involving students in their work. The aim was two-fold: students would gain first-hand experience of problem-solving in authentic work situations, and businesses would benefit from the fresh thinking and ideas of students. Bringing the two together in a collaborative partnership, however, required new ways of working.

**Making it happen**

The centre invites local SMEs to flag up business problems or product ideas so that they can be partnered with students with the right knowledge and expertise. Centre staff identify suitable projects, which typically last 10-15 days, and involve appropriate students in scoping, designing and testing prototypes in partnership with the company. Work completed on a project counts towards the students’ final qualification so subject staff are also involved as a routine part of the assessment process.

This collaborative approach has the added advantage of drawing students directly into the research and development (R&D) arm of companies rather than relying solely on skills gained in college as a route to employment. Students involved in these partnerships are able to work on real business issues and can draw confidence from the exercise, many going on to find employment in the SMEs they are partnered with. In some cases, students have even taken inspiration from the relationship to form their own businesses. If nothing else, students acquire work experience and gain an appreciation of the world of work beyond college. To sustain the flow of projects, InnoTech holds regular roadshows to attract new business partners and problem-solving opportunities for students.
Technology

Technology provides the platform for collaboration and communication between the student and the SME. What form the technology takes varies according to the nature of the problem and the ideas being worked on. The centre aims to be as open as possible to industry-specific technology in order to familiarise students with software and tools they will use in employment. Students in their turn can support companies in using technologies that are new to that company but may be vital to its ongoing success.

Impact

The initiative has had the important effect of creating relationships between businesses and students that can translate into real jobs. To date, InnoTech has successfully generated over 200 real-world scenarios for students to work on in partnership with SMEs as a means of preparing them to enter the world of work. It has also generated in excess of £11 million for the regional economy. The centre has partnered five colleges in the Gazelle group of colleges, delivering R&D projects on their behalf in the areas of design, electronics, software development, ICT or renewable technologies. The work of the InnoTech Centre has also received widespread acclaim from local businesses and praise from the Northern Ireland Inspectorate:

“The support provided by the College both on-site and in-house is of exceptional quality; the businesses involved report considerable added value, including sector-leading solutions in the areas of product design, waste management and energy, e-commerce and computer-modelling technologies.”

Education and Training Inspectorate, Northern Ireland, June 2014

Following the success of the InnoTech project, the college has gone on to explore new ways of supporting small businesses. This is in areas such as engineering and manufacturing, renewable energy and sustainable technologies, and creative and digital media. The college employer support programme ‘InnovateUs’ is designed to provide mentoring and practical support for the small and micro-businesses served by the college. Like the InnoTech Centre, the programme aims to develop a modern economic development infrastructure. It does this by bringing together industry and academia into a structured environment to improve the capacity and technical expertise of small or fledgling companies.

InnoTech was awarded an AoC Beacon Award in 2013.
Find out more

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