

Co-operation between enterprises and Universities of Applied Sciences, ubb, Berlin, Germany¹

Description of the approach

The Environmental Information Systems in Berlin Enterprises, the '*Umweltinformatik in Berliner Betrieben*' (ubb) is an example of a win-win co-operation between the University of Applied Sciences and its surrounding region. The ubb project provides a framework for creating business and practice-oriented links between the Berlin business community and current research at the University of Applied Sciences of Management and Technology; FHTW (*Fachhochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft*). Together with students from the Business Environmental Information Systems (*beis*) course, Berlin enterprises develop individual solutions to tasks having a theme related to the environment. The ubb approach thus creates a win-win situation for the study course and the co-operating local enterprises as well as for the city of Berlin.

The aim of the ubb project is to integrate expertise and the research results from the *beis* course into business practice in the setting of workplace-based training projects. In consequence, ubb furthers the development of the environment-relevant potentials of Berlin businesses by sensitising and qualifying the employees who are involved in the co-operation project. At the same time, the students make their first experiments in planning and carrying out practical projects at Berlin industry. Collaboration between the *beis* course and the firm takes place in the context of enterprise projects during the Master's course or specialised practical placements during the Bachelor's course. These co-operation projects are coached individually by the staff of the FHTW University.

The ubb project ran from 2004 to 2007 as a model project, co-financed by the Berlin Senate for Economy, Labour and Women's Issues and the European Social Fund. The Berlin Senate actually plans to develop further the ubb approach as a cross-university project between three Berlin Universities of Applied Sciences and to widen the range of co-operation themes beyond environmental topics. The ubb model project showed that there is a need for individual qualification and training on the job for the companies' staff in Berlin. It turned out that SMEs especially do not train their employees as a result of lack of adequate qualification offers. The co-operation between companies and local universities has the potential to fill this gap. Project costs were planned for programme management, ongoing evaluation, the acquisition of co-operation partners, and the coaching of the student projects. The overall costs totalled €580,000 over the three-year project period.

Why the approach is relevant?

In general, there could be a better co-operation between Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and enterprises. The assumption is that the co-operation between local enterprises and HEIs, if developed further, will bring mutual benefits. The college can be a driving force to foster a more knowledge-based society in the region. Currently, a large part of the students leave the region after completing their studies. This could be changed through a closer co-operation between the universities/colleges and the enterprises and public institutions. In the best case scenario, new jobs can be created or students can enter existing jobs upon graduation supported a priori through the project. In co-operation projects, like the one we propose, the company's employees are trained to do specific jobs, while carrying out a workplace-based project with the students.

1. Source: Reiner Aster (2007), in: "Building Effective Local Partnerships: Organisational Challenges and Strategic Orientations". OECD LEED Trento Centre Capacity Building Local Governance and Partnerships.

Reasons for the success of the approach

Threats and weaknesses

- The co-operation projects between HEI and enterprises have to be designed, planned, and coached very carefully. In particular, if partners (company, students, and university staff) do not know each other, the risk of misunderstanding and time-consuming co-ordination is evident.
- University and private companies work with different cultures, methods, approaches, and constraints on both sides. This can cause conflict, which can be resolved by regular communication.
- Students seem to have a tendency to plan larger projects than they can handle in the foreseen project time. It is important that the design of the co-operation projects and the planned tasks are realistic and implemented within the scheduled timeframe.

Strengths and opportunities

- The practical benefit for the companies in 'using' the expertise of the universities (HEIs) is obvious, and is demonstrated by the positive feedback generated during the evaluation.
- Qualifying company staff is not easily done, especially in SMEs. This is due to the fact that often the offered qualification courses do not cover the actual needs of the company or the single employee. Workplace-oriented qualification, initiated by co-operation projects such as the ubb projects, can be a solution through up-skilling the employees on the job.
- The biggest factor for a successful implementation of such local co-operation projects is motivated staff at the university who are interested in the companies' practical problems. They guarantee the actual knowledge transfer to the companies and therefore the win-win situation for the enterprises and the university. In the long term, this can affect the whole local economy.
- The Master's students are actually experts who develop individual solutions for companies' problems. This can be the basis for further co-operation between the businesses and the university, leading to further innovation and eventually the creation of spin-offs.

The obstacles that were faced and the quality of the response taken

At the start of the programme, implementation and organisational problems in the co-operation projects arose and were solved by frequent communication between the external project management (gsub) and the university staff. gsub also acted as a broker between the companies and the university project teams. The start of the individual co-operation projects needs more intensive coaching by the specialised university staff. Regular presentations by the students on the project's progress minimised mismanagement or misleading efforts. A former attempt to implement the ubb project failed because the university staff was unable to convince the companies of the project's added value. The external programme management (gsub and BS&U) was needed for the project to succeed. The two bodies organised the contact with interested companies and trained the university staff to develop further the business contacts into strategic partnerships and to gain new future partners.

Considerations for adoption of this kind of approach

The ubb approach is conducive to adoption by a willing and motivated university which has an interest in the local economy's practical problems. In addition, a partner able to reach and motivate the local enterprises is necessary. Business management or owners must be open to the approach. An intermediary or a well-trained person who is accepted by both sides should translate between the two cultures. The support by the local authorities and entrepreneurial associations is necessary to implement the new approach and to facilitate the dissemination of project results.

Contact details and website for further information

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