
Birmingham City University

A New Approach to Enterprise Support

Birmingham City University is experienced in running enterprise programmes, and over the last 10 years helped support a large number of individuals to set up their own businesses, raising the profile of enterprise and entrepreneurship. Over the past few years, the University has seen an increased demand from individuals who wish to develop social enterprises.

The University was keen to develop its expertise in the area of social enterprise and prior to the HE Support programme they engaged with UnLtd to run a series of workshops to raise the profile of social enterprise within their institution. These were extremely successful and the University wished to build upon the momentum and profile that the partnership with UnLtd brought to the University. Led by the University's Research, Innovation and Enterprise team, they initially planned to align the running of their HE Support programme with their existing enterprise support programme, using the same application methods and processes. In most cases the first point of contact for students interested in their enterprise support programmes was to submit a written application.

Upon assessing many enterprise applications a number were rejected at panel as their proposals failed to clearly explain their ideas for a business venture. When speaking directly to applicants who had been rejected, the team quickly identified that some of the students actually had great proposals and verbally were able to communicate their ideas, energy and passion to make their venture a success.

They therefore introduced a pilot scheme for the social enterprise programme comprising a pre-application stage that consists of 'idea development' session on a 1-to-1 basis with all interested applicants. During this session they discuss key areas such as social aims and beneficiaries, costs/finances, marketing, customers, sales and — importantly — sustainability. They challenge the applicant's current understanding of social enterprise and educate them in the importance of not adopting a model that is reliant on recurring grant funding. Many applicants plan on simply applying for grants to deliver their activities but fail to think long-term.



The Birmingham City University team offer advice and guidance on developing their idea and encourage them to consider different income generation methods.

In addition to discussing their proposal, they talk through their motivations, aspirations and hopes. This methodology has enabled a better understanding of their needs relative to their abilities and resources. These conversations also help the team in assessing the applicant's attributes and motivation to succeed, so that they can ensure they're backing the right people with the Awards. The flexibility of the HE Support programme and the minimal reporting required has meant that they are able to focus more on the applicants as individuals and build a better rapport. From first meeting with applicants, the Birmingham City University team ensure that they are seen as very approachable and they encourage regular contact. Birmingham City University have adopted an 'in time' approach to support, tailored to the individual. As a result of their pre-application support session, the team are able to identify Award Winner's support needs, helping them access this support from the very start of their journey.

Part of their support package for Award Winners includes linking them with an internal or external mentor to help them develop their model or to focus on a particular area of need. This mentor match can take place at any stage of their journey and at an appropriate time before or after submission of an application.

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An added value of their pre-application 1-to-1 support is they are able to ensure the students know that this programme is not an academic exercise. The team make it clear from the start that this is the applicant's own business, for which they make their own decisions and they are not being scored or assessed.

Once the students have taken part in these early stage support activities, they are asked to complete either a Try It or Do It Award application form, depending on how well developed their ideas are. At this stage the applicants have really honed their ideas and are able to submit a good quality, concise proposal. Most applicants are encouraged to begin with a trial run to pilot their products or services. Therefore the Try It Awards really meet the needs of their stage in the journey.

Award Winners and applicants, whether social or commercial entrepreneurs, are able to access a series of sessions and workshops on key areas of starting a business. After seeing the long term benefits of early stage support the university is piloting a method of delivering pre-application support to large groups of students at a time.

They recently delivered a pilot two day early stage 'Bootcamp' (based on methodology developed by NESTA) which began with an introduction to enterprise. They run sessions on personal and business values, customer relationship building, personal survival finance, business funding marketing and sales, and finally a launch programme; they deliver exercises that encourage applicants to look at 'bigger picture' business opportunities and their personal long-term goals. The team enlist the support of guest speakers who inspire the applicants by talking about their own experiences of starting a business.

All attendees are encouraged to informally present their idea to the room and are given support on perfecting their pitch. Throughout the two day programme the emphasis is on self-reliance, decision-making and action planning in real life scenarios. Time is allocated to 1-to-1 conversations, and peer support (which is paramount for young entrepreneurs) is encouraged throughout. Many students develop their confidence and decision-making skills over the course of the programme and leave with a more comprehensive knowledge of how their idea will be turned into a working business.

The Birmingham City University team's approach to early stage support will now be adopted across their enterprise programmes. They are continuing to refine this methodology which has been welcomed by their Award recipients.