Evaluation of the UK Futures Programme:
Offsite Hub (Scotland) Case Study Report

UKCES

UK COMMISSION FOR
EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS

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1   Introduction

The UK Futures Programme (UKFP) is seeking to provide an innovative approach to tackling workforce development issues. The UKFP is not intended as an extension of previous large scale funding initiatives by UKCES, but instead is adopting a different approach by offering smaller scale investments, targeting particular issues and sectors, and seeking greater levels of innovation. The UKFP has four key aims, to:

- Support collaborative approaches to workforce development issues amongst employers and, where applicable, wider social partners.

- Encourage innovative approaches to addressing workforce development issues.

- Identify ways to address new or persistent market or system failures which act as a brake on UK workforce competitiveness.

- Identify 'what works' when addressing market failures in relation to workforce development, for adoption in policy development and wider business practice.

UKCES has commissioned SQW to carry out a real-time evaluation of the programme. The aim of the evaluation is to develop a rich understanding about 'what works' in addressing workforce development issues; understand the conditions that can stimulate workplace innovation and learning; actively enable continuous improvement of the investment approach; and communicate the learning in a way that can readily inform and influence policy and wider practice. As part of the evaluation and in order to improve their understanding of key themes, UKCES have commissioned SQW to conduct a number of case-studies with the aim of collecting more in depth insight into the research questions.

This report summarises the case-study that has been conducted on the Offsite Hub (Scotland) project. The findings from this case-study will feed into a wider thematic paper on what works in creating effective collaboration between organisations to address a common workforce development challenge.

2   The Offsite Hub, Scotland

2.1   Project scope

The Offsite Hub (Scotland) project, is one of five projects which were funded under Productivity Challenge 1 of the UKFP (Addressing skills deficiencies in the Offsite Construction (OSC) sector). The remit of the project was to create the Hub as a centre of expertise, which would define and showcase skills requirements and ensure collaboration between professions[1].

The project was led by an industry and academic collaboration. Its governance structure included a management team and a steering committee. The **management team** consisted of two academic partners and two industry partners. The academic partners were Edinburgh Napier University and Heriot Watt University; the industry partners were CCG (OSM) and Stewart Milne Timber Systems, which are two of the largest companies in the timber frame market in Scotland (together holding around 40% of the market)[2]. The management team was responsible for the day to day development and implementation of the project.

The **steering committee** consisted of a wider group of stakeholders[3] from government bodies, academics and the wider industry, brought together by the project lead. The purpose of the steering committee was the scaling up and internationalisation of the Offsite Hub once it was fully developed.

- The project was working towards three key outputs:

- Development of bespoke training materials for industry partners.

- Development of generic training materials for the use of the wider sector.

- Scaling up and internationalisation of the Offsite Hub.

Work on the project was split into two three-month windows. The first one focused on research, in which the two lead academic partners carried out scoping research with each of the two lead industry partners to understand their current skills gaps and needs. The second focused on development and implementation, in which the bespoke and some generic learning modules were developed. Bespoke modules provided training on specific processes and products used within each individual company, such as the manufacture of

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[1] Offsite Hub (Scotland), 'Building Offsite – an Introduction' (postcard).
[2] CCG is one of Scotland's largest privately owned construction and manufacturing companies, employing over 600 staff; Stewart Milne group is also a major independent home builders and timber systems manufacturers, employing over 800 staff.
[3] The stakeholders who were invited to join the project's steering committee included: Construction Scotland Innovation Centre, Skills Development Scotland, Construction Industry Training Board (CITB), Scottish Enterprise, Scottish Development International, Link Housing Association (Link HA), UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), Equate, College Scotland, Architectural Design Scotland, Scottish Government, Stream Live, Homes for Scotland, Nvirohous, RIBA, BuildOffsite, Strategem, Oregon, MAKAR, CLDB, and Scott Frame.

particular offsite construction components. The generic modules took the elements of the bespoke content that are applicable more generally in the industry, to create modules that were useful for students and professionals across the sector. The initial focus was on the bespoke content and the initial development of the generic modules, with a view to scaling up and internationalising the use of these materials over the long term, after the Productivity Challenge was complete.

The work of the project, as part of the UKFP Productivity Challenge 1, was carried out between September 2014 and March 2015. UKCES investment in the project amounted to just over £138k. The industry partners have invested additional funds amounting to around £26k. In addition, the industry partners have made contribution in-kind estimated at just over £127k (this included freeing up senior management time to attend meetings and staff time to engage with various activities of the project). Funding was also secured from other public bodies, which contributed a further £61k to the project.

Key lessons learnt – what works in achieving collaboration?

- Previous working relationships between organisations underpinned the success of the partnership.

- The industry partners were more open to working together with a body they trusted and in particular with an individual with whom they had previous experience of successful joint working.

- Partners were motivated to join the partnership when they identified a pressing business need that could be addressed through the project.

- The fact that the project was focused on skills, which was perceived as a 'safe' topic by the industry partners, helped allow competing companies to collaborate.

- Having an external (non-industry) partner to act as intermediary in bringing partners together and drive the work forward while industry partners focussed on their business needs was a vital element for the formation of the partnership in the project.

- Good and open communication between partners was important in helping ensure that all partners agreed the aims and focus of the project activities.

- Having a favourable opinion of collaboration as an approach to addressing business needs and challenges meant that the industry partners were more likely to join the partnership than others.

- Both industry partners provided access to their facilities, sites and staff, which was a significant aid in developing trust between the partners and facilitating sharing of knowledge and learning within the project.

2.2   The collaboration between the partners (management team)

Edinburgh Napier University first learned about the opportunity of the UKFP through their involvement in the research conducted by UKCES into the skills deficiencies in the Construction industry (Evidence Report 74)[4]. Edinburgh Napier University felt they had a strong knowledge of the construction industry through its research activities, however they identified a gap in their knowledge in relation to its current skills needs. Therefore, the lead team member at Edinburgh Napier University disseminated the call from UKCES across their existing network of industry stakeholders. Edinburgh Napier University also took the role of project management - liaising with UKCES, engaging partners with the steering committee and keeping the momentum of the project going.

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[4] UKCES (September 2013) Technology and Skills in the Construction Industry, Evidence Report 74. Accesses online https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/305024/Technology_and_skills_in_the_construction_industry_evidence_report_74.pdf.

At the same time, both CCG (OSM) and Stewart Milne Timber systems had seen the call for applications for Productivity Challenge 1 of the UKFP, and had considered submitting a bid separately. Both CCG (OSM) and Stewart Milne Timber systems were in the Edinburgh Napier University network as they had previously worked with the lead team member at the university. When the call from Edinburgh Napier University to join in partnership for the bid came through, both CCG (OSM) and Stewart Milne Timber systems expressed interest.

The construction industry has seen growing demand in the OSC sector which both industry partners reported could potentially double their turnover in the next few years. However they identified that their employees and supply chain lacked the skills required by the OSC sector and that there was a lack of suitable training provision to address these gaps[5]; these skills gaps were acting as a barrier to the growth of their business. As such industry partners welcomed the opportunity to address these skills issues. They welcomed the idea of working with the university (and each other) as they recognised that they would be able to achieve more over the six-month duration of the Productivity Challenge by pooling their resources.

> "Construction companies do not normally talk to each-other, but in this case the benefits outweighed the disadvantages"
>
> [Steering Committee member]

CCG (OSM) and Stewart Milne Timber Systems are direct business competitors. However, they came together in the context of the Productivity Challenge. This was because both companies were keen to address the skills gaps to improve their respective businesses. The focus of the project, addressing skills gaps, was perceived by both industry partners as a 'safe' topic for collaboration, having low risk of loss of Intellectual Property. Furthermore, each company focused on a part of the OSC delivery process, and no business sensitive information was shared. They acknowledged that the market is underpinned by skills, and gaps in skills are bad for business. Joining in partnership for the project, to them, made business sense.

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[5] For example, site management and logistics skills in the context of offsite projects, understanding the technology used in OSC and use of materials in OFC.

Edinburgh Napier University opted to bring in another academic partner with greater experience of working with the OSC industry. Through a call to academic institutions in their network, Edinburgh Napier University identified Heriot Watt University, another Edinburgh based university, as having the required knowledge and expertise in skills, research and developing training materials specifically related to OSC. When Edinburgh Napier University approached Heriot Watt University to join the project, the team at Heriot Watt University were working on developing a new training technology (using virtual reality capabilities). Edinburgh Napier University agreed to trial this new technology as part of the project's outputs, as this fitted in with the Productivity Challenge objective of encouraging innovative solutions.

The industry partners and Heriot Watt University had not worked together prior to the UKFP project. They had all had links with Edinburgh Napier University through previous projects they worked on together. More specifically, they had all worked with the lead team member at Edinburgh Napier University and had known each other personally. It was the lead team member at Edinburgh Napier University that brokered the partnership in the project through a personal approach (e.g. telephone calls and meetings).

As Edinburgh Napier University was the most familiar with the relevant research and had the most experience, they took the lead in writing the bid, with partners commenting and contributing as relevant. A pre-project "Steering Committee Meeting" was also held to help shape the proposal. Edinburgh Napier undertook a snap survey of the main offsite operators in Scotland based upon report 74 in order to understand the wider sector needs and this was presented at the meeting, as were preliminary thoughts on what the project objectives should be, based on the survey findings. Feedback from this was used to inform the project proposal.

The industry partners were keen that the academic partners take the lead in managing the project, and saw leading on the bidding process part of that. The four lead partners met and discussed what each wanted to achieve through the project. The industry partners shared their businesses needs in relations to skills, looking at the most immediate issues as well as future needs. Edinburgh Napier University looked at how activity to address the businesses specific needs could feed in to the generic, wider outputs of the project. Once a draft of the bid was written, the lead partner at Edinburgh Napier University circulated the draft amongst the other three partners, and a few member of the steering committee. The comments on the draft were incorporated into a final version of the bid.

Once the funding was awarded, the four leading partners all came together to discuss the details of implementing what they had set out to do in their bid. Through their discussion they quickly came to the realisation that their initial thoughts required some refocusing, and that in order to ensure that the project achieved maximum impact, it should focus on the current needs of the businesses. A decision was made to work on the two parallel lines of the manufacturing process that were identified as having current gaps. The partners then split into two teams of two (Heriot Watt University and Stewart Milne Timber Systems in one and Edinburgh Napier University and CCG (OSM) in the other) to cover more ground. Each team worked on a different line of the manufacturing process, which mostly fitted in with each of the industry partners' expertise and most immediate needs (CCG (OSM) focused specifically on skills relating to the offsite manufacturing processes and Stewart Milne Timber Systems focused on onsite processes including erecting and sales). Through the process of the development and implementation of the project the partners met regularly on a monthly basis (and towards the end of the project fortnightly) to discuss their progress and share their learning.

2.3   Engaging end-users

Key lessons learnt – what works in engaging end-users?

- Engagement of industry partners' managers helped to promote the participation of employees within the companies to test and inform the design of the modules.

- Finding the time for employees and academics to come together for testing and learning activities can be challenging due to competing commitments. Through communication between partners and willingness to be flexible, these challenges can be overcome.

- Working with employees of the industry partners meant that the feedback that was received was relevant and reflected current gaps and needs. This guided the academic partners in developing modules that were beneficial for all partners.

The project adopted an approach that incorporated testing and learning in the development of the modules to help ensure that any outputs met the needs of end-users. All content that was developed was based on the findings of a research exercise carried out by partners at the beginning of the project. This provided some important intelligence for the team when developing training material. In one significant example, the research identified the need for learning materials providing detailed assembly instructions for installers. In response to this, an assembly guide was developed for installers at Stewart Milne Timber Systems, which included exploded 3D diagrams and an animation of the sequencing of assembling components.

In planning the testing and learning element for the bid, the end-users of the project had a key role. Each of the partners defined their end-users differently. For the industry partners, the end-users were new and existing employees and staff in their company in the first instance and employees in their supply chains further down the line; for Edinburgh Napier University the end-users were '*everybody*' – the staff of their industry partners, young people who consider acquiring qualifications in the industry, and stakeholders in the wider OSC sector. In the context of the project, the partners focused on the 'immediate' end users of the industry partners, i.e. their current employees and potential learners.

Employees were selected to assist the project at the various stages by the managers in each of the companies. Managers selected staff from different divisions of the company, with different roles and at different levels to gain their feedback on the design and content of the prototype training modules. To gain a wide range of perspectives products were trialled with a range of staff including designers, erectors and technical factory staff.

Engagement of employees in the project took place in two stages. During the first stage of the project (the research stage) the academic partners carried out scoping research with each of the industry partners. Managers and employees of the industry partners were engaged in the scoping research through filling in questionnaires and participating in discussion groups. The purpose of the scoping research was to explore employees' existing skills sets and any perceived gaps. The information that was collected in the scoping stage fed into the content and design of the bespoke modules. For example, although the original intention was to use an innovative technology of Virtual Reality in the delivery of the training modules, the feedback from the employees suggested that this approach would not be appropriate for their needs, and so this idea was abandoned. Whilst the project ultimately did not use Herriot Watt University's expertise in this area, the university was still able to provide valuable inputs to the research and development of the training materials.

The second stage of employee engagement saw them testing prototype modules and training materials, mainly through piloting sessions. In these sessions employees received training on one module and were asked to provide feedback in terms of the content (e.g. clarity and relevance) and usability (e.g. format, time). Managers in each of the industry partners were heavily involved in the testing process; they met and spoke with their employees after each testing session to gain a better insight into their feedback, and to ensure that the business needs had been considered. The feedback that was provided through the piloting sessions shaped the final version of the modules.

Industry and academic partners reported that engaging the employees in the scoping research and the testing of the modules was invaluable, as it provided a clear indication of what worked and what was less effective. Without the contributions of employees it would have been unclear how effective both the bespoke and generic materials were in actually improving the skill levels of workers. Employee feedback allowed the team to adjust the content to include the right balance of hands on training, visual aids, online learning and classroom teaching. The academic partners had the expertise of developing training modules in general, but the content and structure of the bespoke modules was very much guided by the input of the end-users, which in turn was guided by the industry partners' business needs.

That said, this approach was not without its challenges. The main challenge that both partners faced was finding the time for employees to engage with the development of the training modules. Both industry partners commented that academia and the industry do not work with the same timetables. Some of the feedback required meetings in person, so researchers and staff could look at the issues in detail, and busy schedules posed a challenge.

In other cases it was an issue of providing feedback in a timely manner, i.e. ensuring staff tested the module and provided the feedback promptly so as not to delay the development work. Through a mutual understanding that everyone needed to be flexible in order to accommodate the needs of the project, all partners managed to free up their teams to some extent, to meet and continue the development work on the modules. In the case of CCG (OSM), this limited the number of staff that could engage with testing of the modules, and so feedback was provided by the managing board on behalf of their employees and based on company requirements. One of the critical future challenges for both companies will be to convince managers of the value of these materials, in order to motivate them to release staff to undertake training.

Beyond a role in the **development and testing** of the bespoke training modules, industry partners were also looking to engage their employees in **undertaking** the training. However, Stewart Milne Timber Systems found it difficult to get internal buy-in from staff and getting people to sign up and 'own' the training. The main issue was getting the buy-in from department managers, who were reluctant to free-up their staff to take on training when they could be working. They were also hoping to engage employers in their supply chains in training their own employees using the bespoke modules. However, convincing their supply chain to free up staff time and invest in training was another significant challenge that they had to face.

Stewart Milne Timber Systems addressed this challenge by employing a graduate trainee to work on the project on a full time basis, with tasks to promote the training internally, and help with the engagement of the supply chain. CCG (OSM) also took on an intern, but slightly later in the process. This decision was influenced by the effectiveness of the intern at Stewart Milne Timber Systems which demonstrated the need for extra capacity. In addition to promoting the bespoke modules internally, both industry partners identified their interns as important factors in the success of the project delivery. In addition to acting as a dedicated point of contact for the academic partners, the interns collated and compiled much of the information for the project and helped to co-ordinate the research and content development work.

Efforts by the interns, and the teams at both industry partners allowed department managers to see the benefits that staff would receive from new skills and made them more open to making time for training. They also faced this challenge in particular with suppliers, many of whom are SMEs, which have less leeway to allow time off for training. The company is considering using "lunch and learns" and half day sessions, to try to provide a flexible approach that will reach as many people as possible These ideas are still being developed in consultation with managers in order to create a training package that can be delivered to staff without unduly impacting on their workload.

End users were also engaged by embedding the training content in the work environment. CCG (OSM) uploaded video training content to displays housed at the relevant pieces of equipment at their site. This was intended to give new users ready access to training materials and also provide a refresher for experienced staff. Additionally, the industry partners use the new content to feed into their "Design for Manufacture and Assembly (DFMA)" processes. This means that the content can be used for internal architecture technician training but also to ensure compatibility of component design with production process flow capability.

2.4 Collaboration with wider stakeholders

Key lessons learnt – what works in engaging wider stakeholders?

- The stakeholders for the steering committee were identified for their strategic value and potential contribution in the scaling up of the project. This has increased the potential of the project to successfully scale-up its work.

- Personal links between the project lead and various stakeholders were a key driver of stakeholders to join the steering committee. Based on these personal links, engagement was mostly successful through personal calls.

- For some stakeholders, an additional motivation was that the issue that the project was trying to address was relatively high on their agenda.

- Having a body (CSIC), with an interest in the project as part of their remit and with good links to academics and industry stakeholders, was a key enabler in taking the project forward and scaling up the work. It was beneficial in particular that the head of CSIC had personal knowledge of the project and was involved in the development of the bid and the early stages of the project.

- Engagement with the wider circle has become easier when the project had something tangible to demonstrate the outputs.

- Engaging stakeholders where there are no existing links is challenging and requires more time and thinking and research into finding the right people to get the buy-in from.

The project has established a steering committee, formed a group of stakeholders from government bodies, academics and the wider industry, brought together for the purpose of supporting the project in the tasks of scaling up and internationalisation of the Offsite Hub once it was fully developed. This activity will take place after the end of the short lifetime of the Productivity Challenge.

The lead team member at Edinburgh Napier University once again took the lead in identifying, approaching and bringing the stakeholders in the steering committee together. These stakeholders were identified based on their strategic interests in the project (e.g. the Construction Scotland Innovation Centre, the Scottish Government or Scottish Enterprise), through their potential contribution to the outputs of the project (e.g. CITB or Skills Development Scotland), or through discussions with UKCES (e.g. Colleges Scotland). In most cases, the stakeholders were approached directly to join through phone calls or personal meetings from the lead member at Edinburgh Napier University, who had personal links with the majority of the stakeholders.

The project had variable success in engaging stakeholders in the project, with some stakeholders getting more involved than others. Some of the key stakeholders who were actively engaged with the project included:

The Construction Scotland Innovation Centre (CSIC) was a key partner in relation to the scaling up of the project. From the outset, it was intended that the Offsite Hub (Scotland) would be an integral part of the CSIC. The CSIC plans to build on the foundation laid by the project, in terms of the outputs that have been developed, as well as achieving collaboration between employers, and develop a joined-up network of academics and industry partners to address skills gaps in the wider sector. The CSIC believe they are well positioned to promote the scaling up of the work, building on their wide network of both industry and academic bodies and so had a self-interest in the success of the initial phase. It is worth noting that the head of CSIC was personally involved in the development of the bid of the project and its initial stages (when he worked at CCG (OSM)), and so much of the partnership relies on their previous working relationship.

Scottish Enterprise got involved because they were keen to join the steering committee as they are keen to know about any opportunities relating to OSC manufacturing. They identified a need for the sector to grow, but recognise that there is a lack in skilled people to allow the growth of the sector. Scottish Enterprise actively disseminated the outputs of the project across their extensive network of stakeholders, raising interest in the wider industry and laying the ground for scaling up the work of the project. The lead member from Scottish Enterprise knew the lead team member from Edinburgh Napier University through previous joint work.

The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) is the industry training board for the UK construction industry and aims to improve skills provision and quality within the sector. CITB became involved because they have an interest in the future skills requirements of the sector and wish to improve their understanding of the challenges that the offsite sector faces in this area. They also see an opportunity to accredit the training modules developed although this has not been achieved so far.

The Scottish Government became involved due to policy work around providing greener homes, which will require an increase in use of Offsite construction techniques. The Scottish Government has taken a watching brief of the development of the project in order to inform policy development.

The project steering committee met quarterly over the course of a year. The meetings were used for receiving updates on progress and reviewing the achievements of the project. Case-studies of the implementation and effects of the bespoke modules have been shared with the steering committee members, with a request that they disseminate these across their respective networks.

Various stakeholders suggested that having a project lead who is well connected to figures within the various relevant bodies (academia, the public sector and businesses) with personal links to people in these bodies helped to engage the wider audience. Furthermore, all those who were actively engaged with the project had a vested interest in promoting the growth of the OSC sector, and in particular were supportive of the collaborative approach the project took.

In addition, feedback from the project leads and some of the wider partners suggested that once the bespoke modules have been developed, the project could demonstrate what the outputs are going to look like and how they will be used. The industry partners provided case-studies of the outcomes of the training that some of the employees took, which also helped demonstrate the benefits of the modules. Edinburgh Napier University commented that they have gained insight into the fine details of the OSC technology in a real-life scenario, which was invaluable and which they could not have get at without their collaboration with the industry partners. It was commented that having a tangible product to demonstrate the project helped engaging stakeholders from the wider circle.

That said, the engagement of stakeholders in the wider circle was not successful with some. Some did not engage due to personal circumstances and others due to lack of time or because the issue was not perceived as a priority for them. Furthermore, it seems that the project was not successful in making connections beyond those that were already known to team members. One member of the steering committee commented that the feedback from these bodies that were less engaged was that their role in the steering committee was not clear to them.

It is worth noting that due to the short lifetime of the Productivity Challenge, most of the time was invested in the development of the first output and laying the ground work for the second and third outputs. The work around expanding the circle of partners is at its early stages, and most of the work is expected to take place outside the Productivity Challenge. With CSIC taking the lead for reaching out to the wider sector and the lead team member at Edinburgh Napier University remaining as the project manager, the collaboration between CSIC and Edinburgh Napier University is building momentum and a detailed action plan has been put in place to scale up the work on the project, including looking into opportunities to expand internationally.

2.5   The benefits of working in collaboration

Key lessons learnt

- The collaboration was beneficial to all partners as everyone felt that their objectives were met.

- Partners were able to achieve more outputs and faster as more people were involved.

- Different insight and skills of partners strengthened the partnership and promoted the shared learning.

- Engaging stakeholders from wider circles meant that the project has the potential to build on these stakeholders' networks to scale up further.

The process of establishing a partnership between the industry and academic partners, as it happened in the project, highlights the importance of good communications between the partners, in ensuring there is an agreement on the aims and foci of the project activities. Furthermore, openness and willingness to adapt a collaborative approach in addressing business challenges is of key importance. Speaking with the representatives of the industry partners it was clear that both believed that companies should be more open and willing to come together more often to address deficiencies in the industry. In the example of this project, both industry partners agreed that had they not decided to join together in partnership they would not have been able to develop modules for both the OSC manufacturing process the project has worked on, because they did not have the capacity to cover as much ground had they worked on their own. They would encourage other companies to collaborate with each other in addressing common issues to ensure they can achieve their business goals. In turn, this has also meant that the generic training materials were able to cover a broader range of topics, making them applicable to more businesses and occupations.

> "There is a lot of demand on the industry, coming together helps to ensure that there is a proper foundation going forward"
>
> [Industry partner]

The strength of the partnership between academics and industry partners was that each brought a unique insight, expertise and skills to the mix. The academic partners provided a wider sector perspective and impartial voices to bring together the industry partners. The academic partners also had expertise and experience in drawing down funding streams and dealing with organisations like UKCES, providing a bridge between industry and public sector bodies. The industry partners brought a practical focus and a working knowledge of the day-to-day issues and working methods in construction.

> "Collaboration helps to share risks, provide critical friends and give you access to more brainpower, whilst allowing everyone to benefit."
>
> [Industry partner]

A key benefit for the industry partners was that during the work on the project they visited each other's facilities, learnt about each other's training processes and exchanged ideas. Discussions in the early stages of the project helped to build trust and a good working relationship between the two industry partners, as well as highlighting the possibility of visits to share information. As the project developed, the industry partners came to the view that any concerns about sharing information were outweighed by the benefits they would gain from working together. Both partners believed they had good practice to share and felt it was mutually beneficial to do so. The industry partners have not worked with each other before, but have now forged links between the two companies, opening the door for future collaboration. Indeed, the companies are now working together on a separate R&D project, showing that this relationship has sustained and created new opportunities for them both.

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