

The impact of SEEDA on manufacturing in the South East – a university view

At the outset, it is important to record that the overall impact is positive. There is a good body of evidence that SEEDA has not acted as a 'money in, money out' organisation. It is worked in a strategic way to target funding towards regional priorities, working in a constructive partnership with other regional bodies. There has however been a pattern of changing emphasis over the years of SEEDA's existence. In the main this change has been appropriate and reflects a maturing role of SEEDA within the manufacturing sector and a rationalisation of the various associated regional bodies. To benefit from SEEDA's support, institutions will need to be proactive in influencing this changing role.

The early days

In the early stages, funding was available to universities to establish state-of-the-art facilities to support the substantial enhancement of intelligent design and manufacture supported by appropriate CPD and training. For example, the work of the MAS SEEDA-funded division of EEF or the collaborative Rapid Product Development Group (RPDG) provides strong evidence of substantial business improvement in the manufacturing sector. Other major investment relevant to the manufacturing sector includes the regeneration projects in Medway, Hastings and the Isle of Wight. Here there is a more varied pattern of success, with the Hastings manufacturing goal yet to be achieved.

Other early days funding established a network of Enterprise Hubs. Where these hubs quickly formed productive collaborations there are good examples of manufacturing business improvement – for example, the RPDG/Newbury Enterprise Hub with a successful 5th Framework bid. A similar positive example of partnership is the collaboration among a small group of universities and South East Marine. This benefited from SEEDA ESF co-financed investment that provided improvements in time-to-market and business mentoring for 70 SMEs over a two-year period.

Evolution

There are indications that SEEDA is moving away from the direct funding that is largely focussed on the creation of efficient but largely stable manufacturing. Attention is now directed towards a regional interpretation of the DTI technology and innovation programmes. This is an approach that is consistent with the overall pattern in the region of funding manufacturing improvement. For example, the history around the development of the RPDG, from collaboration between two institutions, through the RPDG/Enterprise Hub project to the current manufacturing Knowledge Exchange HEIF2 funded project is clearly a success for SEEDA and its HE partners. Similarly, the role of SEEDA in Finance South East and the HEIF2 funded South East Proof of Concept fund (SEPOC) is another success story.

The next few years

Some of the recent rationalisation involving the many agencies with overlapping business improvement objectives is also welcome. An example of a productive initiative to support (not just) manufacturing capability was the SMART award administered by SBS. The final days of the scheme were somewhat messy but the relaunch of the scheme as the SEEDA run R&D awards may be more productive. Similarly the amalgamation of Business Link and SEEDA is a welcome move – move that has the potential for a more co-ordinated approach.

There are other signs of maturing partnerships. For example the close relationships between angel networks and Enterprise Hubs are working well in some hubs. The creation of the Hastings Hub with its partner universities has the potential to move the local manufacturing agenda forward. The impact of the Global Regions initiative is promising in at least one part of the region with the Solent Sunrise project – a partnership including the cities and universities of Southampton and Portsmouth, Havant Borough Council (with its associated Langstone Technology Park) and business champions including the CEO of VT group. This project is based on the very successful San Diego Connect university to business brokerage that was identified through this SEEDA initiative and the development work continues to attract SEEDA funding. Although the objectives are wider than just manufacturing they are largely technology driven and will have major manufacturing impact.

Conclusion

The impact of SEEDA has been positive. Maximising the role of SEEDA for the manufacturing base does require (as in all things) effective networking and the capacity to work with more than one funding agency at one time.

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