

## WORKING TOGETHER TO DEVELOP THE RURAL ECONOMY IN UK

It has been challenging to find effective ways to connect education with small businesses to develop the rural economy. We had found that many small businesses were not aware of the opportunities to meet skill needs through apprenticeships and work placements and we wanted to improve this co-operation.

We based the pilot in Connect-VET project on aspects of the following two cooperation models: Union of local entrepreneurs (Estonia) and Intergenerational entrepreneurs' forum (Spain). We developed ideas for joint networking events from these models. For example, we liked the idea of working with a network of rural entrepreneurs to support rural development and promote entrepreneurship to the younger generation (Estonian model). This led to us contacting rural business networks to look at their business development and skill needs. We also found the Spanish model useful in terms of holding events to engage with employers for knowledge exchange between entrepreneurs and students. This led to us working together to involve businesses and students in three pilot events.

The partnership in the pilot started with a university (Bath Spa University) and a further education college (Norton Radstock College) exploring how students can help rural businesses through apprenticeships and work placements. We then investigated rural business networks and support services and invited a representative from the West of England Local Enterprise Partnership Rural Sector Group and the West of England Rural Network to join our team to help us understand more about the needs of local businesses. Later, we invited another business partner from Wansdyke Limited to join us to develop further our links with small rural businesses and organise the three networking events. We held regular meetings to plan the events and our business partners discussed business needs with the international team at our project meeting at Bath Spa University in May 2014.

Our aim was to build relationships between business and education. We wanted to establish the current and future skill needs of rural businesses in order to support the development of the rural economy and shape the curriculum. We also wanted to discuss research needs and latest research findings and how these could be used to help businesses in a practical way. We also wanted to provide a matching service for work placements and apprenticeships to meet skill needs.

By the end of the pilot, we expected to have raised awareness of how education can help businesses to develop skills and grow through work placements and apprenticeships. In practice the partnership planned and delivered three business events in different rural locations to discuss skill needs, research and practical ways of working together. The first event '*How to access skills and talent to help your business*' was held in the early evening at Norton Radstock College with presentations and discussions on skill needs, funding, apprenticeships and work placements. We invited the Managing Director and a former apprentice from a local radio station, Somer Valley FM, to explain the benefits of apprenticeships and work placements (see UK Infographic on the project website for more detail). Evaluations showed that businesses were interested in placements and apprenticeships and specific leads were followed up.

The second event *'Grow your business'* was held in a business location at Farrington's Farm Shop with breakfast provided. Building on feedback from the first event, there was more time for group discussion on the benefits of apprenticeships and work placements and the business owner explained how he had developed his business and gave guests a tour.



The third event *'Make the most of online Marketing'* was a training session in response to a business need. We organised an experienced trainer to deliver the session and students from Bath Spa University explained how they had helped a business to develop their online Marketing. Evaluations showed that the session had been extremely useful to participants in developing their social media and web skills as well as networking with other small businesses and learning how students could help them. We also publicised the events using a range of media which helped to build awareness and promote our project.

We raised awareness of the benefits to businesses at different levels from practical help to higher levels of support such as website design. Working together to organise events helped all parties to develop understanding of business and education needs. This led to Wansdyke Limited participating in the international seminar in Spain, lecturing to Spanish students on business needs and being on the business competition panel at Bath Spa University. The links with the Local Enterprise Partnership have led to involvement in a Local Action Group to promote entrepreneurship.

Whilst we were not able to achieve our objective of discussing research needs and latest research findings, we learnt that it was more difficult to achieve in terms of engaging a different part of the university in the time available. Overall, the results were very positive and we certainly met our aim of building relationships between business and education.