

# Understanding the needs of its region

## CLAIM FOR DISTINCTIVENESS:

Placing themselves at the heart of their region by listening to the needs of local people and businesses and taking a can-do attitude to satisfying those needs.

## THE VC'S VIEW:

“I describe Teesside as distinctive in three areas: business-focus, a can-do attitude and widening participation. I know a lot of universities claim distinctiveness based on a business focus; but we believe that we do it differently. We don't go in to companies to sell what we have; we go in and talk to them and find out what their issues are, so that we can offer them the business solutions that they need. It may be that that solution is a knowledge transfer partnership, a research project, or an internship. We are very proud to say that we aim to behave like a business. We offer the same service standards, the same turnaround times, and the same levels of professionalism.

“We are a can-do organisation. People tell me that what's good about Teesside is that there are 2,000 people who all share the same vision and want to contribute to the development of this region. It's a very flexible, responsive, friendly place, and that's something we've nurtured over the last decade.”



PROFESSOR GRAHAM HENDERSON

# CASE STUDY – TEESSIDE UNIVERSITY

When the university approaches a business to ask if they have a problem that Teesside could help them with, the answer is usually yes; but if not, they gear up to make it happen. Graham says, "As an example, there was a need for improved dental care in the region. We said, 'we can do that'. We had no pre-existing expertise, but we built a fabulous facility and we are now running a range of dental health courses.

"We're in a part of the country with particular issues in education and employment rates. We have gone out of our way to make ourselves accessible. Only 20% of the population in the region have higher level skills and the majority wouldn't dream of going to a university. Our approach is to take the university to them. We offered to build a higher education facility (at our cost) on the site of each of the five further education colleges that we partner with in the region. As a result, we have increased our part time student numbers from 2,000 to 18,000 over the last 12 years."

**There are several ways in which Teesside identifies businesses to engage with.**

**It can be through:**

- their enterprise department
- the networking of the VC and other senior staff
- the contacts they have on advisory groups that help them develop their programmes
- the 70 businesses that they foster each year, many through their own graduates.

## HOW DID THEY WORK TOWARDS THEIR DISTINCTIVE IDENTITY?

Teesside's distinctive identity was carefully embedded internally before it went external. When the VC arrived, he saw that the institution needed to develop more robust systems. "I tried to drive change internally so that our reputation grew, and our systems and processes worked for us. After a number of years our confidence grew so that I didn't need to spend so much time internally. My role then became much more about positioning the university in the region, and then nationally. When we got the University of the Year award for 2009/10, that gave us a real platform for publicising what we have achieved," he says.

Similarly, Teesside's Director of Marketing and Student Recruitment, Dennis Kelly, ensured that a re-branding process was carefully managed internally before going public with it. "We asked for volunteers from each school and department to be brand ambassadors.

We spent a couple of months with them, giving them the information they needed to be able to spread the word, and using them as a way of gathering and responding to feedback before we went public with it. As a result, when we did, people weren't undermining it."

## WHAT DID THEY LEARN?

For Dennis, it was as essential to embed the new logo within the institution, as it was to get the design right. Teesside took seven months over it, consulting staff at all levels over design options, and what identity they wanted. Along with the brand ambassadors, this led to a great outcome. "A re-branding can be such a source of disapproval – and what we got was acclaim and support," says Dennis.

## HOW DO THEY KNOW THAT IT'S WORKING?

The work that Teesside has done on widening participation has been well recognised. "So much of what we have done has since been recognised as sector best practice and been replicated elsewhere," Dennis says.

Teesside conducts an annual review of its achievements, looking closely at what has gone well, and what problems there are. This is followed by a planning conference which includes not only the directors and deans, but their assistants and deputies, the principals of the local colleges, and the students' union. Participants talk about where the university is going, and what changes they want. The VC then uses this to develop the university's general direction, and asks every school and department to formulate their plans against that backdrop. "I want people to engage with the plans and feel empowered to act; and to me, that gives people a real energy and drive," Graham says.