

**By:** Mark Dance, Cabinet Member for Economic Development  
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**To:** Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee - 12 October 2016

**Subject:** Developing stronger partnerships with Kent's universities

**Classification:** Unrestricted

**Past pathway of paper:** None

**Future pathway of paper:** None

**Electoral Division:** All

### **Summary**

Earlier this year, the Cabinet Committee considered a report which set out a number of areas in which KCC could work more closely with the county's universities. Following discussion at the Committee, this report highlights some current areas where there is potential to link the universities' knowledge base with business opportunity.

### **Recommendations**

The Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee is recommended to NOTE this report and to comment on the potential for a closer working relationship with Kent's universities.

## **1. Background: Building stronger links with Kent's universities**

- 1.1. Earlier this year, the Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee considered a report on the opportunity to build stronger links between the County Council and Kent's four universities. This followed a series of presentations by the universities to the Cabinet Committee, in which each university set out how it contributes to the county's economy and where it saw the opportunities for further development.
- 1.2. The report noted the scale of the university presence in Kent: with 45,000 students across four institutions, the higher education sector is an important driver of growth, especially in Canterbury and to a lesser extent in Medway. However, while relationships are positive, there is not at present a clear shared strategy between KCC (or Kent and Medway Economic Partnership) and the universities. This potentially places Kent at a disadvantage compared with

some other areas – particularly the metropolitan city regions – which have developed effective university – local authority partnerships.

- 1.3. The report highlighted some areas in which KCC and the universities could work more closely together – in particular, in better communicating the business support products on offer; helping to ensure that the universities respond to local economic need; and showing that their research strengths can benefit the local economy. However, it was recognised that stronger joint working should be based in practical project activity.

## **2. Recent progress**

- 2.1. Over the past year, the universities' presence on Kent and Medway Economic Partnership has been strengthened, with the vice-chancellor of Canterbury Christ Church University, Professor Rama Thirunamachandran, now a member of KMEP's Board. In addition, recent progress includes:

### *Strengthening the employer voice in higher education*

- 2.2. For over a year, KCC has been working closely with Canterbury Christ Church University to support the University's plans for the new **EDGE Hub**, an engineering facility focused on offering degree-level and higher qualifications through courses developed with the advice of local manufacturing and engineering employers in Kent with a significant work-based component. Based in Canterbury as part of the planned expansion of the University's main campus, it is envisaged that the Hub will also have a dispersed presence elsewhere in Kent and will also build links with local schools, particularly in East Kent.
- 2.3. In developing the EDGE Hub, KCC contributed to the development of the business case and the identification of employers' needs, building on the Workforce Skills Evidence Base reported to the Cabinet Committee in 2015, with Paul Carter chairing the project's high-level stakeholder group. Following this, KMEP endorsed a proposal to the Local Growth Fund for capital funding, the outcome of which should be known later in the autumn.

### *Linking business and the research base*

- 2.4. Successful university – local authority partnerships also involve increasing the availability of university research and research facilities to business, as well as expanding the skills base. In parallel with its merger with NIAB (a Cambridge-based agricultural research body), KCC has supported **East Malling Research** (now NIAB EMR) in developing its business plan and securing additional funding that will help it to commercialise its research. This recognises the fact that while NIAB EMR is relatively small in terms of the number of researchers it

employs, it plays a key role as a leading specialist horticultural research institution. It also has very close links with Kent's nationally-significant horticulture sector, which could be developed further.

- 2.5. Together with Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council, KCC has supported a capital grant from the Local Growth Fund; as with the EDGE Hub project, the outcome of this is awaited.

#### *Understanding research strengths*

- 2.6. In September, the University of Kent, with the support of the other Kent universities and KCC, and in conjunction with other universities in the South, submitted a proposal to Government to prepare a **Science and Innovation Audit**. If successful, this could provide us with a strengthened knowledge base regarding the research specialisms of Kent's universities and the potential for their local commercialisation. A decision by Government is awaited, but even if the proposal is unsuccessful, it may be useful to progress further work to understand the research base in any case.
- 2.7. Alongside this, KCC is working with Canterbury Christ Church University and the University of Kent to take advantage of the universities' research expertise to understand the potential impacts, challenges and opportunities for Kent arising from Brexit. A report is currently being prepared, for completion later in the autumn.

#### *Developing new provision*

- 2.8. Finally, work is underway to explore the potential for new provision at the universities at Canterbury. This includes scope for a **new medical facility** linked with local hospitals, which is currently being investigated by Canterbury Christ Church University and University of Kent. Such a facility could have relevance to the growth of the pharmaceutical and biosciences sector in Kent, and could also, by increasing access to specialist expertise, help to drive improved health outcomes in Kent. As part of the Thames Estuary Growth Commission's early work, Lord Heseltine recently visited Canterbury and discussed these proposals.
- 2.9. It should be noted that there are several proposals for additional medical facilities with educational and innovation elements, reflecting demand driven by a growing and ageing population. These include the Kent Institute of Medicine and Surgery at Maidstone and emerging proposals at Ebbsfleet. Further work needs to be done to consider the support that KCC can provide to ensure that these different proposals are compatible.

### **3. Moving forward**

- 3.1. The identification of concrete projects in which KCC and the universities have shared interests is a positive starting point for the development of a stronger strategic relationship. It is worth noting that work is progressing with a number of institutions and that in some cases – such as the proposed medical centre at Canterbury – two universities are involved.
- 3.2. Building on these initiatives, it may be possible to develop a joint ‘strategic agenda’ between KCC and the universities. Early discussions have already taken place with the universities and these will be progressed over the coming months.

### **4. Recommendations**

- 4.1 The Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee is recommended to NOTE this report and to comment on the potential for a closer working relationship with Kent’s universities

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