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Academic gains from Knowledge Transfer Partnerships between Plymouth University and food SMEs
– An experiential learning taster for students and a business literacy degustation for academics

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Challenge: Can academics develop business acumen by getting involved in industrial partnerships?

A KTP (Knowledge Transfer Partnership) is a UK-wide programme helping businesses to improve their competitiveness and productivity through the better use of knowledge, technology and skills that reside within the UK Knowledge Base institutions, mainly universities. The programme is partially sponsored by public funds, with substantial contributions from the food company. When applying for grants, the focus tends to be in addressing an industrial challenge, with implied benefits to the academic partners. However, it is not always very clear what are those gains, particularly when they become evident time after the completion of the year project.

Solutions: This paper will describe examples of secondary activities and university gains, by the different players from the project associate (a graduate hired for the project), the academics involved, and the students in related courses, compiled from 15 projects over 15 years, with projects mostly focused on process and product improvement, quality systems, safety and traceability.

Knowledge generated or interpreted in academic institutions (knowledge base) is not always directly applicable to business, and through extensive or intensive adaptation it becomes valuable. A qualified person with a direct link to the academic source is the ideal transfer agent. Typically a recent food science /food technology graduate will be hired to fulfil that role.

Examples of activities involving masters or undergraduate students include small projects derived from industrial challenges, sometimes carried out by individual students in work-based learning activities, placements or dissertation work. Examples of group activities include practical sessions when students work on a semi-structured setting to solve problems which are relevant to the partner company, for example on product development, process optimisation, visits where food production lines are monitored and studied, with samples taken and processes analysed; or company sponsored innovation competitions where student-generated ideas are taken into the marketplace.

Benefits: Students would be aware of how their contribution, and their training, is relevant and current, as they address current challenges and solve real problems. Furthermore, company staff and associates (recent graduates) are invited to deliver talks and work along with students, in an atmosphere where a continuum professional development is experienced and a career path in the

local agri-food sector could be easily visualised by students with stepwise stages that appear within reach. It can be argued that these activities have a function in career guidance.

The scheme seems to be about knowledge and technology transfer, but it is the participants who develop and carry the skills and the real know-how to promote innovative changes in the food businesses. The cultural changes are in several directions, sometimes focused on the main associate, but commonly they are bilateral, and they transform those in academia towards how they perceive knowledge and to value their skill-set as it is applied in a context of commercial reality.