



Belfast Met's energy innovation

By Paul McCormack, GenComm programme manager at Belfast Met

The success of Belfast Metropolitan College in securing the first Horizon 2020 funded project for a further education college, the BIMcert project and the Interreg GenComm project are testimony to how the college and companies from the energy sector are ahead of the innovation curve.

The GenComm project, led by Belfast Met, is seeking to address the barriers preventing the greater integration of renewables into our energy matrix and to navigate a new energy pathway to energy security. These successes are evidence of the vibrant innovation culture within the college and the innovation sat-nav process of their 'innovation strategy compass'. This strategy compass is based upon innovation points or navigation rules as the four cardinal points in a normal compass.

The first point, the 'Innovation True North' within Belfast Metropolitan College is that we find solutions for problems not ideas or concepts without business need or foundation. Industry for too long believes that innovation is all about bold and new ideas. It's not, innovation is providing answers to the

problems facing industry. The capacity of the renewable energy sector in Ireland is limited by securing connections to the electricity grid and these are at saturation point. In seeking how to overcome this problem the Innovation team in the Met gathered an EU wide team and secured funding from the Interreg North-West programme for their GenComm project. Project GenComm addresses the energy challenges of communities through the implementation of smart, hydrogen-based energy matrixes.

The second point on the compass, is that the innovation team get out into the market as early and often as possible. The team continually engages with industry, drive the customer feedback process and then iterate, improve and change direction if necessary, in short we bring an urgency to the innovation process. Belfast Met physically support and assist, bringing time and expertise to the collaborative partnership, ensuring innovation is not over engineered and unnecessarily complicated. Through a 20-month process prior to bid submission the GenComm international team physically engaged in the development process.

Point number three is external empowerment. Companies have to deliver in their day job and don't have the time or budget to empower their staff to be innovative. Through engagement with industry, identifying opportunities, championing the innovation process, sharing the risks and taking the lead the Met Innovation team externally empower their partners to be part of the radical innovation process.

The innovation process is a long haul, a marathon and is the final point. Industry and the college in the past have fallen foul of this point and viewed innovation as a short term fix that would deliver long term value. For industry to achieve real long term value they must avoid 'innovation myopia'. This can be the biggest challenge faced by industry and in the GenComm project it was overcome by creating a solid collaborative partnership, open communication, fluid structures, building trust and detailing a long term strategy complete with goals and objectives and real long term value detailed for each partner and the team. ■